Spring 5-2011

Running in Absentia

Jeffrey David Tucker
University of Southern Mississippi

The University of Southern Mississippi

RUNNING IN ABSENTIA

by

Jeffrey David Tucker

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2011

ABSTRACT

RUNNING IN ABSENTIA

by Jeffrey David Tucker

May 2011

Running in Absentia is a collection of short fiction, short-short fiction (also known as flash fiction), and poetry, with a critical introduction.

The University of Southern Mississippi

RUNNING IN ABSENTIA

by

Jeffrey David Tucker

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:

Steven Barthelme
Director

Angela Ball

Julia Johnson

James Robison

Martina Sciolino

Susan A. Siltanen
Dean of the Graduate School

May 2011

DEDICATION

For my wife, my dearest L.G.O.W. *Contigo, mi vida—me caso yo.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee: Angela Ball, Steven Barthelme, Katherine Cochran, Julia Johnson, James Robison, and Martina Sciolino. Thanks, also, to Frederick Barthelme.

Additionally, versions of some pieces contained herein have previously appeared in the following publications, and I thank their respective editors:

CaKe – "Until Catalina," "They Were Cherries"

Tapestry – "A Pinecone and a Runner Sound the Same, Sometimes"

The Broken Plate – "Castrating Sheep with Her Teeth"

POMPA – "Early Summer, Hattiesburg"

Poetry South – "Gustav," "Rubbing Wisteria on My Forehead"

Grey Sparrow Journal – "Delicate Arch," "Magnolias," "Suburban Landscape with Robins"

Willows Wept Review – "Tropical Storm Frank"

The Penwood Review – "Potsherd, Scraping"

Sugar House Review – "Midsummer: Running"

Muscle & Blood Literary Review – "Incongruent Polyhedrons"

Product – "Balboa, Stingray," "Kuntslerroman"

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

The poet Kimberly Johnson once told me that she writes poetry because she loves "to live in the moment"; I find that her statement about living in the moment rings true in my poetry, as well, poetry whose very existence is frequently due to my exploration of past memories, moments that carry a disproportionate weight in my psyche. I reexamine the ordinary, the quotidian; my goal is the reexamination itself—a reliving, almost—as much as the conclusion. Indeed, sometimes my reexamination of the past serves, for me, as its own conclusion. And it is largely the immediacy of poetry, a sense of being out-of-time, which enables this goal.

Mark Halliday writes about this immediacy in his essay "The Arrogance of Poetry," wherein he observes that, "A good poem […] has charisma, it has a peculiar panache, it cuts a new path through experience […]. And this poem is so strangely sure of itself! Where did it get such nerve? It has a quality I will call arrogance. A poem, just by being a poem, says 'I am […] significant […]'" (Halliday 214). As to the source of this "peculiar panache," Halliday asserts that "white space" is largely responsible, especially the "titanically oppressive […] silence" that follows the final line in a poem (Halliday 214-15). In other words, it is not necessarily what appears in a poem that makes it possess its unique kind of immediacy, but it's what *isn't* in a poem—there is a compression of space, a conservation of expression that results in the reader being forced to focus on what is on the page, since there is so much that, one must suppose, could be.

Consider, for example, "Cotillion," a poem I wrote describing a moment of youthful cognitive dissonance: my parents had sent me to a local cotillion, a manners school where I learned table manners and ballroom dancing; during one such evening,

California's perennial wildfires blazed outside the windows of the restaurant hosting the event. To revisit the moment, I deliberately wrote a small, compressed poem, emphasizing the odd silence of the situation. The restaurant was situated atop a hill, and its picture-windows afforded a perfect view of the flames advancing toward homes. The poem's line breaks, especially, create this suspense: "Outside / not on this hill but across Chapman Avenue / the chaparral flames scratch orange / draped and folded. You take her gloves." Additionally, the brief construction of the poem allows me to emphasize the juxtaposition between the urbane instruction in etiquette and the savage destruction occurring outside. That evening at the cotillion, it was difficult to make the ordained small-talk, since the horrific show going on outside was infinitely more interesting than anything that we, early teenagers that we were, could say.

If I were to describe this quality of my poetry in one word, it would probably be *form*, although, in using that descriptor, I'm not referring to any specific poetic form, such as the sonnet, the villanelle, etc. I use the word in a broader sense; for example, even in my free-verse poetry, there is a semblance of form, because I am consciously deciding to leave some things out, put some things in, and I'm capping each line at a particular length. Exclusion, in a very real sense, becomes my form.

This occurs in my poem "Early Summer, Hattiesburg," a poem with a strong narrative element, yet which nonetheless incorporates the idea of exclusion, particularly through stanza and section breaks. The section breaks between sections one and two contain comparatively large amounts of silence, if I can employ Halliday's terminology; the breaks enable me to jump between snippets of life in Mississippi—"I know, living with rows of glossy-hung magnolias, / their burst-blossoms exhaling and blue skies / that

carry on like stale chat"—and Utah, with its dismal weather: "This time last year was sparrow-brown Wasatch winter / was a rusting Ford, was weeks of antibiotics / and their science-fiction names […]." The silence is advantageous to me, as it allows me to focus on what I want the reader to see without having to make allowances for everything I'm leaving out; for example, it's obvious that the weather in Utah isn't always horrible, and the weather in Mississippi isn't always flower-filled and beautiful—indeed, later in the poem, I describe what happens when a tornado appears. Yet the breaks allow me to say, in effect, I know that I'm leaving things out, but don't think about it. There is suspension of disbelief, and the net effect is enhanced.

This also occurs in my prose poetry, as in my poem "The Shakes." On the surface, it is obvious that the lines in "The Shakes" extend to the margins of the page, and the poem doesn't benefit from much of the formal "silence" that I discussed previously. Nevertheless, I find that my prose poetry still incorporates a kind of exclusion-based focus, as its refusal to adhere to commonly-accepted formal norms forces the reader to consider it on its own terms. For example, in "The Shakes," thoughts and images come quickly, almost randomly, bombarding the reader without time to rest: "Sky slinks past, clouds start their heating. Today is the first day of the rest of the first days and eucalyptus bark litters the ground. We tell ourselves to stop and enjoy this fleeting because we read somewhere we ought to and liked it." The reader may think—quite understandably—what is this form? This is my hope. Even though my prose poetry appears, on the surface, more like prose than poetry, the reader must wonder why the poem deviates from other forms, thus allowing what the poem isn't—a story, a free-verse

poem, a sonnet, whatever—to focus the reader on the poem's content. There is silence, I hope, in the reader's contemplation.

***

Additionally, I realize that I have been influenced by the Imagists and their emphasis on the *thing*, as when Ezra Pound instructs his readers that they should write poetry that allows for "[d]irect treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective" (qtd. in Ruland and Bradbury 260). In attempting to recreate past moments for examination, I do allow myself to use more verbiage than Pound would have likely endorsed; for example, Pound's two-line poem, "In a Station of the Metro," reads, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough" (qtd. in Ruland and Bradbury 262). In this regard, I have been heavily influenced by the poet Jay Hopler, whose poetry often focuses on "the thing" without the level of compression seen in Pound's work. Consider, for example, his poem "In the Garden": "And the sky! / Nooned with steadfast blue enthusiasm / Of an empty nursery. / Crooked lizards grassed in yellow shade. / […] Noon. This noon— / Skyed, blue, and full of hum, full of bloom" (Hopler 3). Hopler's images create a singular moment, one that is—as before—out-of-time, dwelling in a sort of liminal space.

I attempt a similar project in "Santa Anas Blew My Fence Away," cataloguing a series of images for my readers, hoping to force their attention on images both beautiful and strange, but, ultimately, highly representative of the Southern California landscape: "Green fennel cloys on hands / after cotton-filled stalks' / quick-cracking. The lichen. / Rattlesnakes dodge nettle / hand in glove with coyotes / that eat my cats." As in "Early Summer, Hattiesburg," these images are not the only things that a visitor to Southern

California would see; I say nothing of the traffic, the strip malls, the sprawling housing tracts. Nevertheless, the rapid-fire imagery allows me to direct the reader's attention where I desire it to be.

I also use this technique in "Like This," a poem in which I contrast two moments: playing guitar as a youth, and seeing an old friend's wedding pictures. Since the reader cannot see the pictures, I begin with a description of them, saying, "I saw your wedding pictures today, / the way you kiss her through your beard / in a Nevada City barn, wildflower boutonniere on shawl-lapel, / narrow-wristed as always." Just as a photograph attempts to immortalize one instant, so does the poem; the images, though static, imply a sort of motion, a moment where each detail carries great weight.

These formal and Imagistic ideas also figure prominently in my prose. One common feature of all the short fiction pieces included herein is that I jump from scene to scene using asterisks as a sort of bridge, much in the same way that I use section or stanza breaks in my poetry. This is particularly visible in my short-short fiction, where I focus on individual moments, letting such instances be illustrative of a situation or character; consider how, in "Balboa, Stingray," dialogue, setting, and action compress into a blurred image of domestic unrest:

> The painted lines in the beach parking lot glow a wet yellow tonight, the streetlight reaching them weakly. Gloria pulls herself inward, clenches herself against the drizzle. Nearby, stomping oil-rainbowed puddles, is her daughter, aged five quick years, her pink vinyl galoshes like flares against the crumbling asphalt. Now, tracing one painted line. I can balance, the girl says, and it works, you know—you know?

The description of the scene and the lack of quotation marks create a situation which, I hope, will disorient the reader slightly, allowing them to see the important details but also forcing them to be swept along with the prose. Yes, there is movement and, even, plot, but the language is such that events happen almost before the reader can predict them.

***

When writing, I am forced to address what my "country" is, to use Flannery O'Connor's terminology:

> What is […] a writer going to take his "country" to be? The word usually used by literary folk in this connection would be "world," but the word "country" will do; in fact, being homely, it will do better, for it suggests more. It suggests everything from the actual countryside that the novelist describes, on to and through the peculiar characteristics of his region and his nation, and on, through, and under all these to his true country, which the writer with Christian convictions will consider to be what is eternal and absolute. (O'Connor 26-27)

Take, for example, "The Pox Party." The story is set in Orange County, California, a place that I feel will always be the psychic home of my writing, if only because of the indelible mark that it left upon me as a child and young man; its scenery, for me, seems tailor-made for inclusion in fiction. When Hal and Mona are forced to uproot themselves from their tony home in South County—where a great deal of affluent families live in Orange County—and move to Garden Grove, they trace a move down freeways which I've traveled nearly all my life.

But, as O'Connor points out, my "country" is not merely composed of my past and present geographical surroundings; my beliefs also appear. Once, after reading "The Pox Party," Professor James Robison asked me if I was a "writer of malice"; his observation, I assume, was based upon the plot of the story: two abusive parents work their young daughter, sick with the chicken pox, to the point of exhaustion and hospitalization. My initial reaction, of course, was to vehemently deny his question. Nevertheless, as I pondered his question, I saw what he was getting at; namely, that there was a moralistic current running through the story, accomplished through showcasing characters that the reader may dislike. Thus, while I never want my writing—fictive or poetic—to descend into the realm of didacticism or moral screed, the reality is that part of my "country" is a sense of morality. Indeed, the decision to include moralistic elements in my writing *isn't* usually a decision—it just happens. Thus, a large part of preparing "The Pox Party" for inclusion herein was trying to deepen the character of Mona, trying to show her to be a person with whom the reader could sympathize, someone for whom the reader could have compassion. Ultimately, I don't think that Mona is an *evil* person, nor Hal—they exhibit the fallibility present in us all. If I must designate a villain in the story, perhaps the role could be assigned to Orange County itself, since the setting of "The Pox Party" serves as a sort of character, continually urging the characters on in their furtive attempts to regain financial control, which it is doubtful they ever had to begin with.

***

If there is one word that appears with greatest frequency throughout my analysis here, it is, perhaps, "focus" or a variant thereof. Much of my writing is designed to focus

the reader's attention on one idea, image, or scene. I love reexamining our ordinary surroundings, which usually turn out to be anything but ordinary, upon further inspection. And, yet, I also find that, by using the aforementioned techniques, readers can also insert themselves into my writing—in the blank space of a poem, in their interpretation of the images I employ, in their reaction to my "country" which appears. Such is the nature of my project; I will never have the last word.

Works Cited

Halliday, Mark. "The Arrogance of Poetry." *The Georgia Review* 57.2 (2003): 214-37. Print.

Hopler, Jay. "In the Garden." *Green Squall*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006. 3. Print.

O'Connor, Flannery. "The Fiction Writer & His Country." *Mystery and Manners*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969. 25-35. Print.

Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. New York: Penguin, 1992. Print.

SHORT FICTION

THE POX PARTY

As the collection agents come through the door, Abby begins to cry, her high, four-year-old wail, and the collection agents, their dark-blue coverall armpits stained darker blue with sweat, don't flinch, filling their arms with the DVD player, with Hal's computer and printer, with the over-under shotgun passed down from Hal's father. It's like our wedding in reverse, Mona thinks, all this stuff, leaving. Mona hears the Mercedes start in the garage, then roll down the flagstone driveway, then drop into gear and rev slowly off into the Rancho Ladera morning, then Abby shrieking like feedback from Hal's electric guitars, which the collection agents now carry out the door, followed by more men in coveralls with the leather-bound living room sofa, and Mona sees it, straightens her back, flares her nostrils.

"Not," Mona says, beginning to run, "my couch." She aims straight for it, the men watching her, still holding the sofa aloft. "Not," she says again, louder, "my couch!"

"It says the couch," one man says, as they set it down. He pulls a paper from his butt pocket. "Right here," he says, points, "the couch."

"Not my—" and Mona is going to tell them, tell them that they never listed the furniture as collateral, never, not in any of their years of flipping houses, not even when the banner-flying business failed and they couldn't make the mortgage payment, no, because the sofa was sacrosanct, the place where Hal proposed to Mona four years ago, where Hal bent on one knee and offered Mona the pink diamond that she knew he couldn't afford but she didn't care because she loved him and his broad freckled face. No. They never listed the sofa as collateral, or the rest of the living room furniture, for that matter. That is what she is going to tell them, but Abby interrupts her, now lying on

the floor and pounding the carpet with her fists as the collection agents carry the living room loveseat out the rear French doors, back around the patio, to the gate.

"Mom!" Abby wails, her timbre rising like a siren. "Stop it!"

"We haven't settled this," Mona says, calling to the men now in the backyard. And then, Hal, in the doorway from the garage, his head panning from side to side. Mona runs to him, grabs his Hermes necktie, pulls him over to the men lifting a leather-bound wingback. "Tell them," she says, "tell them that we would never put my couch down as collateral."

"I did," he says.

"And what did they say?"

"No, Mona," Hal says. "I did it. I put it down as collateral."

"You what?" Mona says.

"It's theirs," Hal says, simply, pulling his necktie from Mona's hands. "That's an estate sale for you." He turns, walks to Abby, picks her up, and Abby buries her face in his shoulder. "I'm sorry." Abby's sobs rise, muffled, from Hal's navy sportcoat, and he paces the empty room, twirling Abby's long blond hair with his index finger.

"What will we do?" Mona says.

"For starters," Hal whispers, looking over his shoulder, "take off your ring. I think it's on the list." Mona glares. "And I parked down the street," Hal says into Mona's ear. "If we hurry, I think they're too busy with your furniture to notice."

***

Driving up Interstate 5 in Hal's seven-series BMW, stuck in morning traffic, Mona is silent, her narrow nose pressed against the glass, watching cars in the toll lane

pass them. Hal didn't want to use the toll lane, which has cameras that scan for license plates, cameras that could give away their position to the collection agency. Mona thinks he's being paranoid, that, at a time like this, the last thing she needs is to be stuck in the Orange Crush and sucking exhaust, and even if the collection agency could access the toll lane cameras, they'd probably scratch their heads, think twice once they saw that Hal, Mona, and Abby were going to Garden Grove.

"This—" Mona says, breaking the stillness. She looks into the back, makes sure Abby is still asleep in her car seat—she wore herself out, Mona thinks, and I'm not far behind. "The worst," Mona continues. "I thought that microbrewery was bad, but this—" A year before, Hal had taken out a third mortgage on the house and bought a brewery apparatus that filled the empty space in the garage. Microbrews were all the rage—it would put Abby through Yale, he explained, a smile on his face, a smile which disappeared when the yeast produced so much carbonation that the apparatus burst. Even after the business folded, Mona was left with a garage full of rusting vats, the heavy smell of yeast accumulating whenever they left the garage doors down. Mona trashed them all after a month.

"Do you know," Mona says, "what Kellie calls Garden Grove? Garbage Grove."

"There's a nice park," Hal says. "Mile-Square Park. It's big, it's nice."

"Garbage Grove," Mona says. "Meth labs." She looks back, first at sleeping Abby, but then out the rear windshield and down Interstate 5, watching the sepia hillsides of Rancho Ladera grow fuzzy with distance. Mona hopes that none of her neighbors were watching when the forty-foot moving van arrived, when her Mercedes left the neighborhood with a strange man in blue coveralls at the wheel. No, she would not tell

her friend Kellie or anyone else about it. This Sunday, they would go to Saddleback Church like always, meet their friends by the reflection pond, listen to Pastor Warren. Afterwards, they would drive to that place that Kellie likes, the one in Laguna Beach on the cliff, and have hors d'oeuvres, sip iced tea, watch the waves. Afterward, if Abby wasn't cranky, Mona would take her to play with the neighbor children her age. Mona paused, thinking. Could she call them neighbors anymore? The word suddenly meant so much to her, more than it ever had.

***

The apartment complex had a lap pool, a gym, and a clubhouse with a billiards room, but it might as well have been a prison to Mona—its high exterior walls, plastered with flaking stucco; its uniform rows of rectangular, brick-covered buildings; the tilting guard booth at the entrance. "See?" Hal says. "It's got a guard. You won't have to worry."

"Why would I worry?" Mona says. "We don't have anything to steal."

Hal has a key, and they let themselves in; it's a second-floor unit, the windows facing south. "You can see Catalina on a clear day," Hal says, but it isn't a clear day and they can't. Mona holds Abby, and the three stand in the apartment's small kitchen, leaning against the beige formica countertops. "Mona," Hal says.

"Don't," Mona says. "I'm really—"

"I know!" Hal says. The front door is still open, so Hal closes it. "What can I say," he says, his shoulders rising. "I'm sorry. I stepped in the office this morning, and I got two calls. The first was Max, saying that the Barton Place deal fell through. The second was the bank. If I had the Barton Place money, I could've held them off, but

without that—" He pauses. "I'm sorry I didn't warn you. Once the bank told me collections was coming, I had to find a place for us to sleep."

"We had a place," Mona says, "and I slept there quite well, thank you."

Hal opens his mouth, raises a finger, but doesn't say anything. Finally, he says, softer, "Barton Place was my last hope, Mona. The business is gone. Max knows a headhunter that I'm meeting with tomorrow, but the market's pretty saturated with guys like me." His mouth grows taut. "I need your help."

Mona just nods. "It's been a while since I've had a job."

"I know."

"We'll need to put Abby in daycare. I don't like that, Hal," Mona says.

"I don't, either," Hal says. "I don't like it one bit."

The adrenaline is dying. "She's still asleep, poor thing," Mona says, pulling Abby away from her shoulder, checking. "She's been really tired lately. I wonder if she's coming down with something," she says, "although she sure screamed at those men this morning."

"That's my girl," Hal says, patting Abby's head. They need groceries, so he turns, opens the door. "Really makes you think," he says.

"What's that?" Mona asks, but Hal is gone.

That night, the three try sleeping on the floor in thin nylon sleeping bags that Hal bought on sale at Target. Hal goes to meet Max's headhunter in the morning and Mona begins looking for daycare in a car she rented with Hal's credit card that still works. There's a Montessori preschool in Orange, twenty minutes or so down Chapman Avenue from their apartment complex, and it's nice—the teachers are all state-certified, the

linoleum floors are clean enough, and the kids aren't pushing each other on the jungle gym outside. Abby goes in with Mona, sitting on the floor and watching the children through the tinted windows. She doesn't cling to Mona's leg, like she often does in social situations, and Mona takes that as a positive sign. "We'd be happy to have her," the preschool supervisor says. "All we need is proof of a recent medical checkup and this quarter's tuition."

"Do you accept credit cards?" Mona asks. They do.

***

Abby's last checkup wasn't recent enough. On the way to the pediatrician's office, Abby falls asleep again, and Mona tells the doctor about it when they arrive. "When did this start?" he asks.

"A couple of days ago," Mona says. "She got really upset when—" she pauses "—when I put her in time-out. I thought she'd just exhausted herself, but it's been going on for two days now. It's not like her to sleep this much."

The doctor looks in Abby's ears, her nose, her mouth. Then he pulls back Abby's long hair, runs his fingers along Abby's scalp, tilts her head down and looks closely along her neck. "That's because she has chicken pox," he says. "Look, you can see the papules forming." Mona leans in, and there they are, up and down her neck, still nothing more than pinheads, but some already turning a throbbing red. "Has she been scratching?"

"Not really," Mona says, but her stomach tightens. Maybe Abby has been scratching, Mona thinks, and I didn't notice? Has she been that preoccupied? She noticed Abby's lethargy, right? Mona and the doctor take off Abby's shirt—Abby hasn't

changed her clothes for two days, Mona realizes, and her stomach somersaults again—and there are more bright dots forming on Abby's back. The daycare, Mona thinks. She needs to find a job. How can she hide this?

"Looks like we're near the end of the incubation period," the doctor says, "they're small, which is why she hasn't been scratching yet, but she'll start clawing away soon enough. Don't let her scratch—we don't want any infection, all right?"

"Sure," Mona says. This isn't possible, she thinks. Now?

"You live in Rancho Ladera, right?" the doctor asks.

"What?" Mona says.

"Rancho Ladera, down in South County, right?"

"That's right," Mona says.

The doctor smiles. "That's where I live. Go to the natural-food store down on Oso Parkway. They sell an organic oatmeal that's great for anti-itch baths. Believe me, in a week, you'll be glad you have it. Other than that," the doctor says, "just make sure she gets plenty of rest. Her immune system needs to be strong. Complications are rare, but they happen."

"I understand," Mona says. "By the way," she says, "our company's health insurance has changed. Can I just pay with plastic this time? I'll get reimbursed later."

***

Kellie calls on the way out of the parking lot, inviting Mona to brunch at the Coto de Caza clubhouse. Abby is asleep again. "She's got the chicken pox!" Mona screams, ignoring the invitation, and Abby still doesn't wake up. "Can you believe it? Now, of all times!"

"Why?" Kellie asks. "What's wrong?"

Calm, Mona tells herself. You've been doing so well. "I wanted to put her in preschool," she says. "Nobody'll take her with the chicken pox. She's a—she's a smart girl, and I'm worried that she's bored at home. She's already memorized every DVD we show her."

"Chicken pox—my. I'm sorry," Kellie says, then stops. "Say, you wouldn't—no, I couldn't."

"What?"

"Well, it's just that my Connor hasn't had chicken pox yet, and he's almost eight. The older they are, the worse it is when they get it," Kellie says.

"Yes, I've heard that," Mona says. "I guess I should be grateful, in a way."

"Mmm," Kellie says, "you know, I feel bad asking this, but could bring Abby over this afternoon?" She laughs. "I feel evil asking this, absolutely evil. He needs to have it, though! What if he got it in high school?"

"The older they are, the worse it is," Mona agrees.

"Yes," Kellie says, "just bring Abby over and we'll have them share a bowl of ice cream or something. Would three o'clock work for you?" Mona says it would. "Oh," Kellie says, "I feel evil, so evil!"

Later that night, Mona puts Abby to bed and sits on the floor with Hal, who came home from his interview that afternoon with a three-quart pot, ramen noodles, and licorice. "Kellie was rubbing her forehead, repeating, 'This is so wrong,' while fetching the children scoop after scoop of mint-chocolate chip," Mona says.

They take stock of their belongings: the pot, which Hal bought at Wal-Mart along with some clothes and toilet paper for the three of them; some paper bowls and plastic utensils; two cell phones; and their one American Express Centurian card, the only credit card not maxxed out. The collection agency probably didn't take their clothes, Hal imagines, but the locks to their house were changed when he went to get them, and Hal hasn't called the bank yet. Or, he thinks, if the bank took the furniture, maybe their clothes went, too.

"Do you think it'll work?" Hal asks. "You know, the chicken pox? Is Connor's sick?"

"It'll work. They might as well have been kissing," Mona says. "Hey, there's an idea."

"What is?

"Kellie and I were talking. She's not the only one worried about this—there are lots of women she knows who want their kids to get the chicken pox before they're too old."

Hal thinks about that. "Why don't they just get the vaccine? It works, I'm told."

"Everyone's spooked about autism. People are blaming vaccines."

"That's nonsense," Hal says, slurping a noodle. "A hoax. It was all over the news."

"But it doesn't matter," Mona says, "what the facts are. People believe vaccines give autism, so they don't want them." She takes a bite. "So I've been thinking. We could throw little parties, charge admission, have Abby play Twister with everyone. Fifty dollars a head?"

"People wouldn't pay that much."

"Kellie thinks they would. It would be buying a controlled environment, a guaranteed infection. They'd know the infection date, so they could track the disease's progress, see if it's proceeding like it's supposed to. Takes all the guesswork out of it." Mona chews. "Plus, I'm a great babysitter."

"Twister?"

"Entertainment and chicken pox. Kills two birds with one stone."

"I wish you wouldn't say 'kill,' Mona." His forehead creases. "What happens if a kid gets sick? I mean, if a kid gets really sick? I don't want you going to jail."

"Me?" Mona raises her eyebrows. "Honey, you don't have a job yet, do you?" She taps her plastic fork against her paper bowl.

Hal rises, walks to Abby's bedroom, cracking the door open. She sleeps on a small mattress that he found leaning against a wall in the apartment complex, and it dwarfs her tiny frame. Even in her sleep, now, she scratches, using her toenails against feet and ankles. "I don't know, Mona," he says. "I think I agree with Kellie. It just doesn't feel right."

"We need the money, Hal."

"I know we need the money," Hal says, "but using my daughter as a biological weapon—"

"It's just the chicken pox," Mona says. "At most, they'll need an oatmeal bath. You had it, I had it. It's perfectly normal. This way, we're just giving Mother Nature a hand."

Hal still looks at Abby, and Mona wonders if he heard her. "Fine," he says. "Let's make flyers."

***

They quibbled over the color of the stationery, ultimately settling on a blazing, chicken-pox red. *New research,* the flyers read, *casts doubt on vaccine safety. Vaccines are implicated in severe adverse reactions*. If they have an allergy to it, Hal reasoned. He knew that it was approaching a lie, probably a lie. *Worried about the chicken pox vaccine? Let your child develop immunity the tried-and-true way in a safe, controlled environment. Plus, we are excellent babysitters—your child will have fun! Call* The Pox Party *today.*

It is fear-mongering, and they both know it, sitting in Kinko's and eating licorice while the copier chugs. "I hate to say it, but fear is strong," Hal says. "The only reason the Barton Place deal fell through was that the buyer got spooked." Abby sleeps on Mona's shoulder, a position Mona now finds normal; when Abby isn't scratching, she sleeps.

"I'm just saying," Mona says, "that Kellie already has people lined up. We don't want to come on too strong."

"It'll work," Hal says. "And what happens when Kellie runs out of people? The recruiter still hasn't found me an interview, and there's nothing in the papers. This is our ramen money."

"We do have the credit card," Mona says.

Hal exhales. "Do you know how much is on that card?" Mona shakes her head. "I'd love nothing more, Mona, than to buy a new house with that card, buy you a new

car, start over, but the bank would just seize all those, too." The copies are ready, so Hal stands, fetches them from the clerk. "I hate it, hate it. If we eat, it's more debt. The roof over our heads is more debt. At this rate, Abby will have to get a scholarship if she wants to go to college."

Mona nods. "I know," she says.

Hal stops, retraces his steps over to the self-service counter. He removes his wallet, pulls out the Centurian card, places the card on the industrial-strength paper cutter. "We've got to stop digging the hole deeper," he says, "or we'll never get out."

Mona's eyes grow large. "Hal, don't be an idiot," she says, "that's our only cash."

Hal drops the cutter's arm, slices the card cleanly in two.

***

Kellie has pushed all the furniture in her den to the edges of the room, and four Twister pads—three culled together from Kellie's neighbors, one stolen from Toys 'R' Us that afternoon—spread across the floor. There's a Disney soundtrack playing, some song about a dead mother and living happily ever after. Twelve barefoot children stand on the Twister pads, ready to strike, as Hal and Mona peer in through the doorway, Abby hiding behind Mona's legs.

"Go on," Hal urges, tapping Abby's bottom with the Twister spinner. Abby's face, chest, and back are now blanketed with inflated sores, many of them oozing a clear serum, some with a hardened droplet on top.

"Mom?" Abby says, looking up at Mona's face.

"Yes, dear. We're right here. Go on," Mona says, pushing Abby into the room.

"All right!" Hal cries. "Who wants to play? There's a big cookie for the winner!" The children all raise their hands, vying to see who can raise it the highest. "Okay," Hal says, giving the spinner a whirl. "Right foot green!" There's a blur of toes stomping and being stomped, some kids cry out, but they do it. "Left hand red!" Again, the kids lunge, and it's too much for Abby, who starts coughing, softly at first, then louder. When Hal and Mona pick her up off the mat at the end of the party, Abby's shirt is soaked through.

***

They can't believe it, counting it, six hundred dollars, most of it in fifty-dollar bills, all for an afternoon of Twister and a stale cookie. They sit on the orange shag carpet again that night, slurping more ramen, Abby out cold on her urine-stained mattress. "I'm proud of her," Mona says. "She was a trooper." She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

"I hope she can keep it up," Hal says. "I was talking with one of Kellie's friends, the redhead, and she's got seven or so friends lined up for tomorrow."

"Oh, dear," Mona says. "What time?"

"Three o'clock," Hal says. "Why?"

"There are five women waiting for us in Mission Viejo tomorrow at noon."

"Well," Hal says, "that should work." He picks at his teeth with his fork. "And now we have capital. We won't have to beg the baker for his stale displays."

"How long does the chicken pox last?" Mona asks.

"I don't know. The headhunter called while you were in the bathroom—I've got an interview next week. I hope," he says, "we can keep this up through then." Then

Hal's phone rings, and he answers, quickly says, "Yes, yes, this is The Pox Party," grabs a pen from his breast pocket and starts scribbling on his arm, saying "Definitely!" and "Absolutely!" and "Certainly!" Hanging up, he says, "We've got another four kids at six o'clock."

"Busy day," he says.

"It's July," Mona says, "and they all want to get it over with before school starts."

"We should have put that on the flyers." Sixteen children are waiting, he thinks. That's eight hundred dollars. Back before he started flipping houses, eight hundred dollars in a single day would've been a fortune to him. Funny, he thinks, how life brings things full circle.

***

Mona wakes Abby at ten o'clock the next morning. "Time to get up, sleepy head," Mona says, and she sees that Abby's pillow is soaking wet. Kneeling down, she parts the long blond hair from Abby's face and places the back of her hand on Abby's clammy forehead. It's very warm. "Hal," Mona says, "Hal, Abby's not doing well."

Hal's broad face appears in the doorjamb, a piece of licorice dangling from his mouth. "Eh?" he says.

"She's really warm," Mona says. "Is that normal for chicken pox?"

"Dunno," Hal says around the licorice. "I mean, I felt pretty rotten when I had chicken pox, didn't you?"

Abby begins coughing again, and it is deep, coming from her chest. There's discharge, and Mona wipes at it with the bedsheet. "I never had this," Mona says, her voice trailing up, more a question than a statement.

Hal sits down on the edge of the bed, looks into Abby's bloodshot-green eyes. "Hey, Abbs, not feeling so hot?" Abby doesn't respond, just whimpers. "We still have some time before our first appointment. Let's let her sleep some more." He cradles Abby's head with his hand. "This mattress reeks," he says, "and so does she." He grabs a fifty and leaves.

An hour later, Mona and Hal bathe Abby, lather her golden hair with Vidal Sassoon, blot her dry with Turkish cotton towels. "I couldn't help myself," Hal says, the remnants of the fifty dollars rattling in his pocket. "And she deserves it for yesterday's performance." She is still limp, her eyes barely open as they strap her into her car seat and exit the apartment complex.

"We're going to have fun again, eh, Abby?" Mona says from the passenger seat.

"Yeah," Abby manages.

"Hey, Abby," Mona begins, "hey, you're a big girl. You're a real trooper. I'm proud of you." There is no reply from the backseat. "Hey, did you hear me, Abby? You're great!" Again, there is no reply. She turns around and sees Abby slumped to one side in her car seat, her head bouncing with the road, her blond hair blocking her face. "Abby?" Mona says, reaching her arm around the seat and grasping Abby's small shoulder. Abby doesn't move. "Abby?" Mona asks again, louder, now shaking Abby, making her head jump up and down. Pushing her head back, Mona parts the blond hair, and Abby's eyes are half-closed; only the whites show.

"What's wrong?" Hal says.

I've done it, Mona thinks. I've done it. "Get to the hospital," she says.

***

When Mona was Abby's age, she fell in love with a horse she saw on television, a golden palomino. She begged her mother to take her horseback riding, and, after a week of pestering, her mother relented. They drove to Irvine Park on the eastern edge of Orange County and found the riding track. The stablemaster wouldn't let Mona take a horse out into the park—Mona was too young for that—but he let her saddle up and trot around the ring's perimeter. Her feet didn't even reach the stirrups, but Mona hid it from the stablemaster by leaning over to one side, stretching her leg to find the loop whenever he looked.

As soon as the stablemaster turned her loose, Mona shouted, "Giddyup!" just like she'd seen on television. The horse bolted, tossing Mona into the air. She landed forward of her seat, the saddlehorn planted squarely in the pit of her stomach. She couldn't breathe. The horse kept running around the ring, kicking dirt as it went. Mona tried to speak, tried to get out a *whoa*, but the saddlehorn, still stabbing her, wouldn't permit air to enter. Why don't they stop me, she thought. The jerking horse kept her from fixing her eyes on her mother, waiting with the stablemaster at the entrance to the ring. They must see me, she thought.

After three times around the ring, the horse grew tired and slowed. When the stablemaster came to lead the horse back into its stall, Mona fell from the saddle into his arms; one of her feet became tangled in the bridle straps, and the stablemaster grabbed her leg and shook it free. Her shoe fell in the dirt, and her mother bent to pick it up. The stablemaster still held her, trying to keep her exposed sock clean, and Mona watched her mother bend down, next to the horse, and Mona wanted to cry out, tell her mother to get away from the beast, but her chest still ached, and she couldn't.

Mona spends most of the drive to the hospital looking back at Abby. The scene from the horse-ring won't leave her mind. What was Abby thinking, Mona wonders. Was she trying to tell me? Mona knows what it is like not to be able to talk, not to be able to breathe.

***

It is pneumonia, the emergency room doctor says, a secondary infection from the chicken pox, filling her lungs with viscous fluid that glows like dirty ice on the x-rays. Yes, the doctor says, real pneumonia, the kind that kills, a very rare complication, but it happens, especially when the patient isn't resting like they should and their immune system becomes depressed, compromised—"However you want to say it," the doctor says, "she's a very sick girl"—and Mona knows what the doctor is thinking, because she's thinking it, too: What did you do to her? Every parent knows that kids should rest when they're sick, Mona thinks. Kids get sick and don't want to admit it; they want to play, but the responsible parent says no, puts them to bed. It shouldn't be the other way around, Mona thinks, standing with Hal and the doctor in a curtained enclosure, staring dumbly at the x-rays while Abby lies unconscious in a bed, each arm bearing an IV in a swollen, purple vein.

"I did it," Mona blurts. Hal and the doctor swivel their heads toward her. "I shouldn't have, Hal. Stupid, stupid, I can't—you, her, I pushed you—stupid, it was too—" she takes off her pink diamond ring, throws it to the floor, and it bounces, lands under the bed—"I mean, everything gone, I figured—" Hall is crossing to her, holding her by the shoulders—"No, Hal, this is me, it's mine—"

"Mona," Hal says, still holding her.

"The *Pox Party*?" Mona says, and she cries, buckles at the knees, and Hal shifts his hands from her shoulders to her armpits, bracing her. "Stupid," she says.

The doctor takes one side of Mona, and he and Hal help her to a chair. "I'm going to go get you something," Hal says, parting the curtain, and the doctor follows him out.

"Hal," the doctor says, raising an eyebrow, "please explain."

"Oh, The Pox Party," Hal says. "Some moms wanted their kids to get chicken pox, so we took Abby around, had her play with them."

"In her state?"

"She did well enough."

"Well enough?" The doctor brings his face close to Hal's, so close their noses are almost touching. "It's basically a coma, what she's in." He stares. "I just spoke with Abby's pediatrician—he says she was weak to begin with." Hal takes a half-step back, but the doctor follows. "Well enough?" he says.

***

Mona looks up when the curtain opens, and it's a woman in a black pantsuit. She sits next to Mona. "Mona, my name is Sherie," she says. "Can we talk?" Mona hears her in a tunnel, far down. "I'm with the state, Mona, and just a couple questions, all right?"

What does she want, Mona thinks. Can't she see, see the poor baby girl, she thinks, see me sitting here? You know it all, she thinks.

The woman down the tunnel is still talking, and Mona doesn't care, keeps her eyes trained on the floor. "Whose idea was this?" she hears the woman say in the distance, underwater. "Did your husband do this?"

There, underneath Abby's hospital bed, Mona sees her ring, somehow catching light, a tiny glint. She remembers going over to Hal's house, having spaghetti that he made, having champagne, sitting on the cognac-hued sofa, Hal's lips against hers, then Hal on one knee—and there's the ring. A pink diamond, Mona thought. Hal had just started flipping houses, and she didn't know how he'd got his hands on a pink diamond. It's quite a ride, he tells her, this life, the ring outstretched, will you share it with me? It's quite a ride, isn't it?

"Yes," Mona says, and then she is quiet.

JONAS

Last semester, Jonas had an English paper due at Cal State Fullerton, a take-home final exam: "Discuss five major historical events that helped shape your life. How? Why?" Jonas sat in his shed night after night, surrounded by posters of his rock 'n' roll icons, eyes fixed on his laptop, the screen blank. He thought of using the Los Angeles Riots back in 1992; it was a logical choice, dramatic, an ace in the hole, but it would have been a lie—he lived in Orange County, not Los Angeles, and even though he'd heard many people in Orange County reflect back on that burning week with knowing, veteran tones, he knew that most of those people weren't anywhere near the riots, himself included. He considered writing about that, instead—people lived in Orange County because it was safe, nice beaches, Disneyland, high property values, yet along comes a riot and they try claiming that, too. What did they want?

He sat there, looked around at his bass guitar gear, the posters. A rough outline came:

"Five Events That Changed My Life"

Grandiose sounding, Jonas thought, especially since he hadn't really consciously thought about the events before—how life-changing could they be if he'd never even thought of them? When the riots happened, at least he knew they would be important, something remembered.

"1951 – Leo Fender invents the Fender Precision Bass"

It was the first production-model electric bass. There were custom one-offs before it, but the Precision Bass was the first assembly-line bass and, many would still

say, the best. "My life began when I got mine," Jonas wrote, feeling that it was the first really truthful thing about his essay.

"1991 – Van Halen releases *For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge*, films live concert"

It had led to years of bass lessons, of rehearsals with the high school jazz band in the vain hope that they'd let him play something that *he* wanted to play, not the down-tempoed version of "I Want Candy" that their teacher always insisted they dredge out.

October Bliss should thank Jonas' cable provider for broadcasting the Van Halen concert back in 1992. He still wanted a bass shaped like a Jack Daniel's bottle, like the one that Michael Anthony played during his bass solo.

"1994 – High school graduation / Tattoo"

Oh, how he labored over the shape of that tattoo, the size—how many colors, how many hours of pinpricking, how it would look when he was eighty, if he lived to be eighty, which he didn't count on at the time, but he wanted to take it into consideration, all the same. Tribal tattoos were just coming into vogue, with more and more surfers down at the beach showing up with dark tendrils wrapping around their biceps, but Jonas didn't want anything faddish that he would regret in a decade or two, let alone when he was eighty. In the end, Jonas settled for a negative image tattoo of famous bass guitars: the Fender Precision Bass; the MusicMan Stingray; a Hofner Violin Bass, like the one Paul McCartney used on The Beatles' Ed Sullivan appearance. To create the negative images, Jonas had his entire left shoulder blacked out, only leaving untouched or shaded skin to create the ghost images. It took three days. Then he buzzed his head.

It all served to signal the starting of a new life, away from El Modena High School, open to exploration. At eighteen, that was what he wanted: anything that would

make him feel the same way he did when he saw Michael Anthony playing that bass solo, the way he felt when he hit his first power chord, like his heart was pushing on the inside of his ribs.

He couldn't think of two other events for the essay. The professor took pity on him and gave him an incomplete grade instead of failing him. Jonas still has to finish the essay; he is supposed to graduate this semester. He meets with his professor every Monday now, and the two look at what he's written. "Think about it," his professor says, leaning back in a threadbare office chair, his polo shirt pulling out from his waistband. "I'm an adjunct, Jonas. I'm not trying to make this hard for you. I'm out of here next semester."

"Don't tell me that," Jonas says. "It makes it worse somehow."

"What does?" Now his professor's hands are behind his head.

"You know, that this is nothing, and I can't come up with nothing. All nothing, which is what I'm getting out of this. It's like that song from *A Chorus Line*."

"I didn't think rockers were into Broadway," the professor says, his eyes opening. Jonas stares. "Here's an idea. Something." He smiles. "Write about the things that made you realize what you want." He sits up straighter. "All of us have those moments where we realize we want—or don't want—something."

There is a fly on the windowsill, and Jonas watches it. The late afternoon sun comes in sideways through the third-story window. Jonas scratches at his forearm. "Like my band, you mean." His face hardly moves.

"But," his professor says, waiting for more, then, "yes, something like that."

More scratching. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" His professor leans in; Jonas smells his breath, earthy. "Not to sound parental, but aren't you about to graduate? You had to major in something."

"That was nothing," Jonas says. "This is a business major factory." His arm still itches.

"You've got to graduate. Just make something—"

"There," Jonas says. "I know." He stands, shoulders his backpack.

"Good," his professor says, not standing. "Do I get a hint?"

"You'll read it," Jonas says, "thanks," and he walks out of the shared office space, down the hall, out into the Orange County sideways sun. The itching on his arm stops. I want, Jonas thinks, to know what I want. It's not much, but he hopes his professor will take it, although, if he's being honest, if the roles were reversed, Jonas wouldn't.

***

Jonas stands in the shed behind his parents' house, his knees bent, his feet a shoulder-width apart, one hand on the neck of the MusicMan Stingray bass slung over his bony left shoulder, the other hand clutching the cold metal plug of a guitar cable. He's thinking about the essay. Across the room—the other end of the cable, crammed in next to Oliver's drum set, Garrett's pathetic little combo amp, the PA system for Stone—three hundred watts of Ampeg amplifier breathe through sixteen ten-inch speakers in two four-foot-tall cabinets, a wall of peeling grillcloth Slowly, Jonas raises the plug to his forehead, touching his skin lightly in three staccato taps, and, each time, the walls of the shed rattle with a hum so low that Jonas feels it more than hears it—there, a flutter on his chest, now a tickle along the edge of his eyelids. Again, to his forehead, he holds it,

longer, and the air grows fuzzy on Jonas' cheeks. He smiles, waits, feels the droning purr sink deeper into his skin, his bones.

***

The shed was originally intended to house a go-kart when Jonas was fourteen, this beige-skinned aluminum-walled shack propped up with tired two-by-fours and held together by Garrett's countertop caulk plus dozens of stickers from Revelation Records in Huntington Beach—Jonas has a friend there who works in distribution, she supplies the stickers—and the odd record store poster, never glued straight on the walls: Ink and Dagger, The Nerve Agents, Napalm Death, even an old Bauhaus number that Jonas bought off the internet, because, he thinks, their version of "Ziggy Stardust" was better than Bowie's, sacrilegious as that may be to Stone and the rest of October Bliss, the purists.

The shed-as-kart-garage didn't last long, mainly because Jonas' parents waited until he was fourteen to get him the go-kart, spotted in the local Pennysaver magazine and purchased for three hundred bucks from a lawnmower repair shop down in the El Modena neighborhood. (The go-kart's engine came from an old Honda lawnmower.) It created a problem for Jonas: even at fourteen, many kids in Orange County are already thinking of their first real car, the private, secret space where they'll first experience speeds over one hundred miles an hour and first dates and chemically altered states of mind—possibly, Jonas had imagined, all at the same time. He didn't want to spite his parents' gift, but priorities were priorities, and Jonas needed space for something with at least eight cylinders.

So, as fun as it was to race the go-kart up and down the uneven asphalt hill in front of his Parkview Terrace house, sending the neighbors' dogs and cats running for cover, Jonas sold it and began saving for the car that would take its place. He actually made a thirty-dollar profit on the sale, since he took it over to Orange Park Acres and sold it to a kid whose parents had two horses and a llama in the backyard. Jonas bluffed him into believing that the go-kart's motor was made of milled aluminum from a kart-racing shop in Japan. There was too much grime covering the engine block to prove otherwise, not that the rich kid could've told the difference. Nobody mows their lawn in Orange Park Acres. Besides, Jonas thought, it wasn't completely a lie—Hondas are made in Japan, after all.

***

Jonas removes the plug from his forehead, rubs the divot left behind. He still doesn't open his eyes, and he lowers the plug to the output jack on his bass, jams it in, pops the speakers, makes the metal walls shudder. There's a pick in his pocket, a wide model that's fully two millimeters in thickness—Garrett always jokes about tiling a bathroom with Jonas' picks—and he locks it between thumb and forefinger, holds it above the strings, turns up the volume on his bass with his pinky.

The strike comes not from his wrist, like most bassists who use a pick do, but from his shoulder, his deltoid muscles, half of his entire upper body thrusting downward through a locked arm and hand, the pick bashing into a string hard enough to throw it out of tune for a moment. First one note, long, sustained, then another, checking to see if he's tuned them right—last month, Jonas bought an adjustable electronic tuner—and he has, all harmonics aligned, so he starts the warm-up that he does every morning and

before every band rehearsal, the introduction to the Red Hot Chili Peppers' version of "Higher Ground" (another cover version that Garrett and Stone pooh-pooh): one note jumps, becomes a triplet, then two, ascending in a picked run, an extra note on top. The original version was slapped, not picked, but Jonas prefers pick over fingers, a slam over a pop. He hammers, his left shoulder hunched to raise his right shoulder to drive a right arm to deliver maximum punishment—yes, punishment, the word that Jonas ran in the *OC Weekly* "Musicians For Hire" section that attracted the attention of October Bliss: "My name is Jonas. I deliver bass punishment."

Too much punishment today, because he feels his low-E string go slack; it's broken at the bridge. I needed new strings, anyway, he thinks. October Bliss has a gig in a couple days' time, and he hates to gig without extra strings, in case something like this happens, which it does, often.

***

Driving down the 91 freeway, Jonas thinks that this driving stuff is really not what he imagined it would be. It makes him think of his college education, which, in many ways, resembles the car—endless expectation, nothing delivered. So he had a car? It was falling apart, the rear lights held on by duct tape, the engine refusing to turn off when he removed the keys. Just like his education, he thought. He could do double-entry accounting, not that it mattered, since everyone and their dog now just punched numbers into a computer. There were plenty of companies hiring, but there were also plenty of people ahead of him with more work experience, people who could say they wanted to work in a cubicle without irony in their voices. He had been through two mock

interviews in the business school's advisement office, and both times the interviewer had told him, "You don't seem like you mean what you're saying."

"I don't," Jonas had replied after the first interview, which is why he went back for the second, to practice his poker-face. The second time, he didn't look disappointed, but he couldn't fake excitement.

Jonas feels a fullness in his stomach, and his throat tingles. He looks at the billboards as he drives, looks at the giant In-'n'-Out burger that actually blows steam. One by one they pass, ads for casinos, for a new mall. None of them would hire him, he thinks, and the feeling in his stomach gets larger, rounder.

***

Octopus Music squats on the corner of Valencia and State College Boulevard in Fullerton, down the road from California State University – Fullerton, Jonas' school. It's the first building of an industrial park, across the intersection from Fender Avenue, where Leo Fender created some of the world's most popular guitars—the Stratocaster, the Telecaster, the MusicMan Bass that Jonas plays. That's how Jonas found Octopus Music—he was trying to find the Fender guitar factory, and he stumbled upon Octopus, instead. (Fender doesn't make Fenders on Fender anymore.)

It's a low building, a lot of cinder block, flat-roofed, probably built back in the 1970s; the rusty air conditioner—it's mounted on the roof near the door, it howls and drips on everyone—is original. Amplifier stacks hunch along the walls like silent giants. But, to Jonah, it is an extension of the shed. Steve, the guy who owns Octopus Music, is a vintage amplifier geek, doesn't carry any amp built after 1965, the year that Fender Musical Instruments got sold to CBS when Leo Fender thought he was dying. CBS

ruined everything, Steve will explain if given the chance, and most other amplifier companies weren't far behind—even Marshall started putting master volume controls on their amp heads. Master volume controls; the whole point of buying a Marshall, the only thing they were good for, was volume, lots of it, enough to make eardrums bleed and neighbors call the police. The words *control* and *volume* shouldn't appear in the same sentence, Steve had explained to Jonas when Jonas first found Octopus Music, and Jonas knew that he'd found his music store. It was where, after saving and saving for a car, he took his car money, got a ride from a friend, and came back with his Ampeg SVT, not a car. The shed was in for a surprise.

Of course, vintage amps cost more money than the average musician can afford, so Octopus sells strings, effects pedals. Steve gives Jonas a ten-percent discount. He likes the guy, his brother in the pursuit of amplified thunder. Plus, he feels sorry for Jonas because of that car he always shows up in. They call it the Helicopter, the way it sounds lurching down the street—the car Jonas finally bought with the leftovers from his amp purchase, a 1967 Camaro that took two weeks to get running, the front half a chipping white, the trunk and back panels primer-coated grey, the engine that takes five minutes to shudder and shake and gasp after turning off the ignition. How could I not give a discount, Steve thinks. Jonas might need a taxi to get home.

"I need," Jonas tells Steve, over the display counter, "heavier gauge strings." Jonas drums his fingers on the counter. "Nickel wound."

"You're already," Steve begins, turning to face Jonas, "using heavy strings."

"I need heavier." The corner of Jonas' mouth is rising into a grin.

"Why," Steve says, leaning his elbows on the counter, "do you want to wear holes in your fingers?"

No exaggeration. Blame it on Michael Anthony, the bassist for Van Halen. When Jonas was fifteen, a year into saving for the car, his parents got premium cable television, PayPerView, the works. At three in the morning, his parents soundly asleep upstairs, Jonas plugged a pair of headphones into the television, flipped open the PayPerView directory, and tried ordering *C.H.U.D.*, a horror movie his parents forbad him from seeing as a child. He got, instead, *Van Halen: Live from Dallas*. The mistake, though, would be fortuitous: the concert was halfway over, and Jonas tuned in just in time to see Michael Anthony on his knees, pounding out a bass solo. A *bass* solo! The headphones were cheap and every low-E that Michael Anthony played sounded like static, but the speed, the groove, it all got him. That weekend, he bought a cheap bass guitar at a pawn shop on Tustin Avenue and played until the tips of his fingers wore off. Then, following the example of Stevie Ray Vaughan, he took superglue and glued what shreds of skin he could collect back onto his fingers.

"I want thicker strings," Jonas tells Steve, "so that I can go deeper." Steve doesn't respond. "You know," Jonas continues, "it's simple physics: thicker string, deeper notes."

"You're already at the edge of human hearing, Jonas." Steve's mouth droops. "You're still breaking strings, aren't you?" Jonas shrugs. "Everyone breaks strings, man, but you're just reckless. The way you play, nothing will last."

Jonas has heard this before. In jazz band, his teacher always told him to stop hacking. His bandmates in October Bliss tell him to stop hitting the strings so hard, stop

making them go out of tune. What's the point of your electric tuner, they ask, if you're just going to pound away and make everything sound sharp? Technique, they tell him. We hired you because you said you punish, but, you know, you don't have to suck to punish.

"You've already got the heaviest strings I carry," Steve says. "I can order thicker, but it'll take time for them to be delivered. And, like I said, I don't think you need 'em." He holds out a packet of strings, bulging in their plastic sheath. Jonas nods, pays. He walks outside and sits on his car's hood. In the parking lot, a silver Porsche is pulling up. It's a 911, sleek as a bird. Jonas watches it get closer. He narrows his eyes, tries to see the driver, but he can't. The sun is burning, straight across on the horizon. The asphalt seems to evaporate and rise.

Coming here does not fulfill him anymore, swapping the stories, talking shop. Time was, the sight of an Ampeg would make his breathing quicken—I was a fanboy, he thinks, all those years, just like the high-schoolers he sees joyriding around town on weekends in their parents' cars, their radios too loud. It worries him that he thinks their music is too loud; he was one of those kids a few short years ago. And all this talk about his bass technique—time was, he would laugh it off, blame others for their failure to appreciate his exuberance. Why, he would retort, are we doing this? We're here to rock, right? He would laugh, launch into the intro of another song, and the band would follow him along. After they'd been practicing for a year, they wouldn't. We're serious, they'd say, we want a contract. It's great, you know, your thing, but we have to sound good. Now, Jonas is the one who waits to join a new song, after someone else begins playing, their timing and dynamic control better than his.

Jonas watches the Porsche, now idling in the parking lot. The windows are tinted nearly black, like a limousine's. A woman emerges from a neighboring shop, crosses the parking lot, and opens the car's door—inside, the car is upholstered in shining black leather, even darker than the windows. Jonas cannot see the driver's face, but he can hear bass notes coming from the car's stereo. It must be a great system, he thinks, one that automatically grows louder as the car speeds up. If I hadn't have spent all my money on bass equipment, I could've had a better car. Not one that nice, but better than the Camaro.

Jonas scratches at his arm, his tattooed shoulder. He slides off the hood, takes a couple of steps toward the Porsche, watching the way sunlight reflects off its curves. The rear tires are wide—the driver revs the engine, drops the clutch momentarily, and the tires smoke on the pavement. He imagines the woman inside, laughing and grabbing at the driver's arm. The driver does it again, and more smoke fills the air. Surely someone will hire him, he thinks. I can write about applying for jobs in the essay, at least. He's still squinting at the Porsche. He takes a step, another, until he stands in front of the hood. The sun slides over the headlights, the grille, into his eyes. The driver revs the engine again, and this time the car lurches forward, fast, and it is upon Jonas.

***

"As I mentioned," Jonas hears the nurse say, "it's not a large fracture—hairline, really, barely one-eighth of an inch. Honestly, if it weren't for the concussion, we'd let you go with painkillers. A day, maybe two, just for safety's sake." She hands Jonas a small plastic rod, a red button on one end, a wire leading from the other. "You're on morphine. Push the button if the pain gets too bad."

"What was that?" Jonas asks.

"Morphine," the nurse says, smiling slightly. "Still having trouble?"

"Did I tell you," Jonas says, "that I'm going to be a doctor?"

"A doctor," the nurse says. "What'll be your specialty?"

"No," Jonas says, "that's not right. I'm going to be an accountant."

The nurse's smile leaves. "Maybe we should check on you sooner," she says, making a note on the clipboard at the foot of Jonas' bed. "One of us will be back in twenty minutes."

"Actually," Jonas says, "I'm going to be a pharmacist."

"I dated a pharmacist once," the nurse says. "Don't become a pharmacist." She leaves. Jonas pushes the button, then again. He sleeps.

***

Jonas sits in the shed on Oliver's drum throne. It's almost midnight. He's got his laptop perched on the snare drum, and no *major historical events* come to mind. He could write about being doped up on morphine for a couple days, he thinks, because that is the worst high he's ever had.

Among the posters in the shed is a vintage piece, one that KISS put out at the height of their Seventies domination. Gene Simmons holds his axe-shaped bass out like a rifle, launches a sparking arc into a darkened stadium. Looking at it, Jonas feels like he ought to feel something, but, no, nothing. Rewind to high school and *that* Jonas would have tried it himself, attaching a rocket to the neck of his bass and firing it off in the backyard or, even better, at a gig. Before joining October Bliss, Jonas played in a glam

rock cover band, and a rocket would've been the perfect finale to a rendition of "Live and Let Die."

It's been coming, creeping up, he realizes. Sticking a live guitar cable to his head—now that was a high, he thinks, back when he first bought the Ampeg, the vibration, the fuzz worming its way through him. He closes the laptop, stands up, straps on his bass. It's too late to plug in the Ampeg, so he picks in near silence. His fingers are stiff from not practicing during his stay in the hospital, and he begins to worry—October Bliss has a gig in a couple of days. He thinks of the essay, of graduation. Why does he want to tear down the KISS poster? Calm down, Jonas, he tells himself. Calm down.

OLIVER

The swings blow in the wind, the swingset long since rusted to a dull tan. High prairie grass bends to the ground, holds, releases. Oliver and his younger sister sit, side-by-side. "What will you do in California," she asks. "*Southern* California. Can you hear that?"

"All these years," Oliver begins, "and I wouldn't tell many people this, but I've wanted a band."

"Oliver," his sister says, "anyone who's seen your room—"

"I know," Oliver says. "But, still, it's like one of those things."

"I don't get you," his sister says, her twelve-year-old hands running up and down the rusty chains.

"No, really," Oliver says, and he looks away, at the hills behind Minersville, the way the moon appears over them in the middle of the day. "Once I make it, it's okay. But don't tell anyone that, you know, I'm going to be a rock star or something."

"Right." His sister looks at the ground. "I'll text you into insanity. That much I can do. Seriously, like every minute."

"Fine," he says. Then, "Just come along, will you?"

"Can't."

"I know," he says. Again, "But come, will you?"

"Okay," she says. They both laugh, softly.

***

The Bunny-Bash arrives on Oliver's last night in Minersville, a central Utah community too small to properly label *city* but too big to call *cowtown* or *township*.

Oliver's family is moving to Orange County for work—Oliver and his father first, because his sister and brother must attend summer school for bad grades received during the past year. If all goes according to plan, his mother, sister, and brother will come later. "What will you remember," friends at high school ask Oliver. Man, Oliver thinks. Images come: the sign at the entrance of Highway 31—*Welcome to Minersville, Settled 1859*—made of graying pine planks and erected on two railroad ties, sticky with creosote; spare crabgrass, the color of unripe olives; shriveled brown foothills, always in the east. The trees: low, scabby cedars, more bush than anything. "Don't know," Oliver replies.

Of course he does. Every year, July 24th, all the young kids gather to help local pumpkin farmers bring in the harvest. They roll fertilizer-smeared pumpkins from foothill patches down State Street to waiting open-back trucks. Dust sprays off yellow-green pumpkins rolling at their feet, lifting in clouds from the wooden bed of an ancient diesel truck, coating teeth, graying hair. After loading, the boys wrestle on the ground in ruts left by trucks' tires. Fathers watch, chuckle.

When Oliver was eight, he got glasses. Another image: the circle of clawing boys, closing in on itself, away from Oliver, forcing him out. Rules were rules: no glasses. Two years later, he got contact lenses, which re-qualified him, but it wasn't the same.

Oliver's family will move before his high school graduation ceremony in June, which is how Oliver finds himself crammed into the bed of a pickup truck with fully fourteen of his friends, a nine-iron in hand, the tires banging over washboard desert paths. We're moving up Grad Night, they tell him, just for you. What would he remember, Oliver thinks, shaking his head. "Give me," he says, raising his voice above the roaring

air, twirling his golf club, "something to remember." His friends smile. Forget the processional, a thrown mortarboard, Oliver thinks. Here's graduation. They drive on into the desert, the truck vibrating.

***

Another rut in the road, another memory: His father spun, the sash of his bathrobe trailing behind his body. He turns, there's the face: "A pumpkin," he says, and Oliver can't speak. His father pulls out a chair from the kitchen table, sits, raises a hand for Oliver to sit across from him. "Bring that nose over," his father says, so ten-year-old Oliver holds his face as close to his father's as he can. Oliver's nose is packed with two silicone tubes and wet, dripping gauze; he can't smell very well, can't detect the aftershave he associates with his father. "Tell it again," his father says. "A pumpkin?"

"Yeah," Oliver says, feeling the vowels in his nose, throbbing. There is a cold tuna casserole on the table next to Oliver's elbows, but, without smell, it is plastic, like the bowl of artificial fruit his mother keeps on the coffee table. "It dropped. I don't know if he blacked out." Oliver's father has brought his face close, looking at the left side of Oliver's nose, then the right, then the left again, then rising and looking down at the bridge of Oliver's nose from above, his eyes narrowing.

"You said rods?"

Yes, rods, thin and threaded and shoved what looked like six inches up Oliver's nose, although Oliver knew that it couldn't have been more than three or four, not, he thinks, that three or four inches up someone's nose isn't a big deal. "They were cold," Oliver says, and his father nods.

The doctor had worried, since Oliver's nose still bled in a narrow, steady stream, even after the long car ride. Feeling faint, the doctor asked, and Oliver pointed his pale face at the doctor—thought, *I don't know*—the slowed world reeling and thick, and the doctor ordered blood. The rods appeared, arrayed large to small on gray foam in a stainless-steel drawer like tiny xylophone keys, and the doctor took a long time figuring out diameters for Oliver's nostrils—some rods went in easily, others barely at all. Each nostril, Oliver remembered, was a different size.

***

And here they were, Tim and Oliver and twelve others, the cold metal truck bed walls digging deeper into their backs, sagebrush on the wind. Tim leans over to Oliver, close enough that Oliver feels him breathe on his ear. "I brought my Ruger," Tim says.

"What?" Oliver yells, the wind still a roar.

"My Ruger," Tim says, patting the chest of his down jacket. Oliver sees the cloth conform to a hard shape underneath. "I told you."

Oliver remembered. Tim found it in a pawn shop in Springdale, a five-shot .44 special with a deep-blued barrel barely five inches long. Short barrel for such a big gun, Tim had remarked. But handy, the pawnbroker told him. Great for wilderness carry, self-defense. Self-defense, Tim said. With a barrel that big, I wouldn't have to shoot—I'd just stick it over the guy's head and run. Tim had never mentioned he'd bought it. He was, after all, eighteen years old. How did he?

The sky is growing dark as the truck arrives at a rusty gate in a barbed-wire fence. A girl jumps out of the truck's cab—her name is Janelle, and Oliver wonders if he'll remember it in a year—and opens the gate. They drive through, leaving the gate

swinging. Even in the dim light, Oliver sees movement in the sagebrush, which clusters along the desert floor like spilled cotton. His grip tightens on the golf club. A minute later the truck stops. The sky is now black.

The driver (and Oliver already doesn't know his name—he's the only guy anyone knew with a big enough truck, Janelle brought him) fires up the movable spotlight mounted on his door, and Oliver sees that they've pulled into a ravine. Short sandstone cliffs rise on either side of the truck; between the walls, the sagebrush is thick, barely space to walk.

"Out you go," the driver says through the window. "Watch for 'em. I want this antenna loaded."

Oliver jumps out of the truck with the others, and the spotlight begins panning across the wash, back and forth, pausing occasionally. The teenagers spread out, forming a line in the small canyon. "Keep your distance," one says, "spread out your arms." Oliver takes his position at the end of the line, next to the sandstone wall. He holds his club on his right side with both hands on it, taut, the shaft pointed upward, the head gyrating in a small circle above him. There's one step, another, pausing to see if his movement causes any rustling from the scrub. He can barely see, even when the distant spotlight reaches him. The truck gradually rolls forward, keeping pace with the hunters.

A hiss from the darkness next to him, then branches cracking. "Get over here," Tim says, softly. A cigarette lighter's flame, and Tim's face appears. "Check it," and the flame reflects off something shiny in his hand. Oliver looks around—he can't see anyone in the darkness—and heads toward the flickering light. The sagebrush in the air has grown dense, so thick that Oliver tastes it like chalky mint on his tongue, walking with

his mouth open. Tim has found a deep recess in the rock, almost a cave, and he's kicking small sticks on the ground into a pile. The lighter comes down, and a tepid glow fills the hollow. He holds the revolver in one hand.

"How did you get that?" Oliver says, almost a whisper, even though the group has moved on.

"Doesn't matter," Tim says, polishing the barrel on his sleeve.

"Of course it does," Oliver says. "Last time I checked, you have to be twenty-one, and a felony—"

"You worry too much," Tim says, and he tosses—it takes a second for Oliver to realize that he's done it, until he sees the firelight reflecting in an arc above him—the revolver in the air at Oliver. "Catch."

Oliver's hands fumble through the air. "Wanna blow my head—"

"The hammer's not on a loaded chamber," Tim says. "I'm not stupid."

"Thanks." Oliver has caught the revolver with the barrel pointed directly at his face. It is wide enough, he thinks, to fall into, for his voice to echo inside. When Oliver was in kindergarten—that was even before he knew Tim—there was a length of terra-cotta-colored sewer pipe on the playground, four feet in diameter, and the kids would run, jump, and try to slide over the top of it headfirst on their stomachs. He hasn't remembered that in years, but it is something else he'd remember.

"You bet," Tim says. "Got it loaded with some wadcutters."

"Where do you get ammunition?" Oliver asks, turning the gun in his hands.

"Only have to be eighteen for that," Tim says. "But, these loads, well—they should be stout." Tim crosses his arms. "Besides, Oll, you don't want to be clubbing anything, if I know you."

Oliver looks at Tim, his twenty-year-old vest, his Henley-style sleeves worn threadbare on the elbows, the patched jeans slouching too low on his waist. "Pull your pants up," he says. "You look like that dancer with the thong on MTV." Tim holds his arms out and spins, hops over the dimming fire, another spin. Oliver laughs. "You're the worst friend I've ever had, you know that?"

"And that's why you'll remember this," Tim says. "Hold that thing out, already." Oliver clasps the revolver in both hands, the fingers from his left hand locking into the spaces in-between the fingers on his right. "No," Tim says, and he moves alongside Oliver, takes his forearms, "it'll kick at'cha. Lock your arms out in an isosceles triangle." He slaps the outsides of Oliver's clasped hands. "And hold it like a man."

"I thought locking your arms was bad," Oliver says. "I thought locking most body parts were bad." When Tim and Oliver had sung together in the children's church choir, Tim locked his knees during a performance and passed out halfway through the chorus of "Popcorn Popping on the Apricot Tree." Once on the floor, Tim peed himself.

"Don't go bringing up—"

"Not a word, brother."

"Now just ease that hammer back," Tim says.

"You're really not helping," Oliver says.

"Then fire the fetcher, already."

"I will."

"Do it, then."

"I will!"

"Freaking—"

The flash illuminates the cave, the sagebrush—Oliver's field of vision goes red, and, for a split-second, he sees the outlines of veins in his eyes. The revolver flies up, Oliver still hanging on with trembling fists, and he falls back into Tim, the back of his head colliding with Tim's nose, one foot rising in the air—then, in a heap on the ground—

Oliver's nose burns with sulfur, and he drops the gun, rubs his nose between his two hands. He stands up, slowly, and Tim dabs at his nose with a sleeve. Tim looks up. "You broke my nose again, fetcher." His eyes are wide. "My nose, again." He sees the revolver in the dirt. "And you dropped my gun. I told you to hold it—"

The laugh comes from within Oliver, noiseless, shaking his shoulders. He stoops, picks up the gun. "Now your nose can be as crooked as mine," Oliver says between gasps.

"I thought we fixed that," Tim says, rising. "Cost your dad a lot of money, that hospital trip."

"Didn't take, I guess." Oliver twirls the revolver on his index finger like a cowboy. Tim holds his hand out, but Oliver keeps twirling. "You know we moved up when we're leaving."

Tim's hand is still out. "I heard."

Oliver stops spinning the revolver. "I really don't want to go." Now he's flipping the revolver from side to side, using the hem of his shirt to clean off the dust. "California sounds great and all—"

"No, it doesn't." Tim says. "It's okay to admit it."

"No, I mean," Oliver begins, "it does, it's great. I got a scholarship, did I tell you?" Tim shakes his head. "But, you know?" Then Oliver brings the barrel of the gun up to his face, holds it with both hands between his eyes. Tim can see that the barrel pushes into Oliver's skin.

"Don't even," Tim says. "Not even funny, Oll, drop—"

"Just playing," Oliver says, pulling back the hammer. "Would be easy, though, just—"

The strike comes swiftly, and Oliver catches most of it on the side of his nose, then a thunderclap, a flash and he sees veins again, then the world goes silent. The gun drops. "I hate you," Tim says.

"I can't hear you," Oliver says.

Tim slaps him across the face, again, then again, holds his face to his and Oliver feels the tip of his nose wet. "Read my lips: I really, really hate you."

"You did that," Oliver hears himself say, the words muted, "I wasn't going to." Oliver pushes Tim's hands off his face. A flash of light, and the truck finds the two. Slowly, they jog out to the group and climb into the bed. Tim still stares at Oliver. "What about your gun?"

"Forget it," Tim says, and Oliver is beginning to hear again.

"Look!" the driver shouts, and he swings the spotlight to his left. There, in the underbrush, is a pair of glowing eyes.

"I got it," a girl next to Oliver shouts. She jumps out, runs to the eyes with her golf club held over her head. The club comes down. A high wail rises into the air, almost a squeal, throbbing and shaking, not unlike a baby's cry. Oliver flinches. It grows louder; Oliver has never heard something like it. It knows it will die, he thinks.

"Stop it!" Oliver shouts.

"Seriously—finish it," the driver says. The girl raises her club again, drops it, and then Oliver hears nothing except the truck, a low rumble beneath him.

***

When he was nine, Oliver's pumpkin was lopsided and didn't roll very well in the kids' procession, so his father yelled, "You're getting in the way," from somewhere in the parade route that Oliver couldn't see. Oliver already knew it: the march of kicking children slowed behind Oliver, his new glasses opaque with dust and forehead grease, his stomping feet unable to guide the aimless pumpkin in a straight line. Finally, it veered into a drainage ditch and down a storm drain. Oliver stood in the middle of the parade, pumpkins rolling around and over his feet until Tim Miner shoved him to the ground, out of the parade route. Oliver lay there; he was too embarrassed to do much else.

A year later, when Oliver received contact lenses and a pumpkin fully two feet across with a spongy, rotten flank, Oliver found Tim and pushed *him* down, then he held the huge pumpkin over Tim's head. That image came, easily: Tim, his eyes like a scared cat, lying flat on his back with two bony knees sticking up and his hands extended to Oliver. The sodden pumpkin dropped onto Tim's face. Oliver tells himself that the

pumpkin fell from its own weight, his tiny ten-year-old fingers unable to grip the dusty sides—who gave a ten-year-old such a big pumpkin, anyway? He tells himself he meant it as a joke, hoisting the pumpkin, *trying* to be menacing, right? But the question remains, and Oliver wonders if that doesn't mean something. No, he thinks, of course it means something. His nose spilling red-tinted pumpkin guts, Tim punched Oliver, broke *his* nose, and Tim's dad drove them both to the hospital in Cedar City.

"Sit down," Oliver's father told him, after he returned from the hospital. "Oliver," he said, "Oliver, you can't fight."

"I know," Oliver said.

His father stood and paced the kitchen—to the microwave, drumming on it with his fingers, over to the stove, pausing with both hands on the tiled counter, back to the table, again, again. "In the end, Oliver, it doesn't really matter whether you meant to do it or not, this pumpkin thing." He sat again, shifting his weight on the chair. "You put yourself in a bad situation, and this is what happens in a bad situation. And," he said, leaning close to Oliver again, "ultimately, it doesn't matter whether you meant to or not, because you did."

"It might have been an accident," Oliver said.

His hands lied on the table, palms up, and Oliver had traced their deep lines with his eyes. "It doesn't matter. If I were to strike you, Oliver, it wouldn't matter what my motivation was, or whether it was an accident. It would still hurt." He nodded with the cadence of his words.

Then there was silence, as his father looked at him, first from one side, then from the other. "The doctor did a nice job," Oliver's father said.

"It hurt," Oliver said. "It popped."

That made his father nod again. "I'm sure it did." His father brought a finger to Oliver's nose, ran it along the bridge from top to bottom. "So, no. Don't fight, Oliver. Wrestling with friends is one thing. This is another." Then Oliver watched a change come over his father's face: the cheeks seemed to grow more empty, more hollow, and the mouth tightened. "But," his father said, "remember this. If you fight, like if someone's bullying you, and you fight—" and the finger still ran up and down the length of Oliver's nose "—then you *win*." The edges of his father's mouth turned up, and Oliver knew he was trying to smile. "My son will win, 'cause he's a *boxer*, right?"

"Right!" Oliver said.

His father put up two fists. "A boxer!" he said again, and they began throwing blows past each other, uppercutting the air. Oliver was laughing—they both were—when his father's fist connected with his nose, then he heard his father shout "Oh, no!" and instantly Oliver was tearing up, and blood poured from his nose onto the wooden table. Oliver was too surprised to cry out as his father, eyes wide, ran for a towel. It wasn't until high school that Oliver looked at his crooked nose and realized where it came from.

***

The way it drips off the tongue, *California*, the way he'd pictured it, in postcard mental slideshows across the Great Basin and down Interstate 15—No, he thought, his family's van chugging through Barstow, Victorville, the trailer behind the van rattling past the world's largest thermometer in Baker. (It was one-hundred-twenty degrees.) No, he thought, this isn't California, the beach, the palm-tree rows in their uniform

march. He'd never realized the state was so big. More desert, then The Inland Empire, Riverside—greener, yes, barely, but not much.

An hour later, Orange, the center of Orange County, still brown. Some palms, but mainly oleander bushes sprouting white and pink blossoms along the road's edge.

"Oleander," Oliver's father says, pointing out the van window. "Can you believe they planted poisonous bushes all over town?" He frowns. "Friend of mine lost a dog to that stuff."

They will live in a house Oliver's father has rented in a subdivision next to a small strawberry field. As the van pulls up, Oliver sees bent shapes in the field, grabbing. His family is alone; the moving vans—the family sold their second car, an old jeep, to afford professional movers—haven't arrived. The stucco house is empty except for a jar of yellow mayonnaise in the refrigerator. They stand there in the kitchen, Oliver and his father. They stare at the mayonnaise jar.

"I hate mayonnaise," his father says.

"My bike's in the trailer," Oliver says. "If you don't object, I'd like to get a lay of the land."

"Be back soon," his father says. "Never know when the trucks'll get here."

Oliver leaves the subdivision the same way the family went in. There is the strawberry patch, row after ramrod-straight green row covered in wet plastic sheeting. He doesn't know where to go; driving from Utah, he hadn't looked at a map of Orange County, or Orange itself, and he only knew where the van had driven, which meant he could get back to the freeway. He had been admitted to Chapman University on scholarship, and he thought about visiting campus, but all he knows is that it is

downtown, somewhere within biking distance of the house, which isn't much help. To the east of the subdivision, hills, round and full, unlike the shriveled ones behind their house in Minersville, and covered in ochre cactus. A small reservoir to the west. In between, the subdivision and the strawberry patch. Men still work the rows.

There is a truck being loaded with wooden flats full of red and green strawberries, their dusky hulls glinting. It is not unlike pumpkin-rolling days in Minersville—Oliver sees a dust-covered kid handing the flats from a stack at his feet up to waiting men in the truck. The kid can't be more than twelve, and Oliver thinks back six years, the same. Strawberries look like a lot more work, he thinks. At least pumpkins roll, or you take them one by one, don't box them up until they're too heavy to move. Some of the men watch him.

A bicycle path surrounds the subdivision, separating the homes from the farm. It runs parallel to a residential access street, and Oliver rides it, bouncing over large tree roots that have grown up through the coarse asphalt—ficus trees, mainly, glossy lime-green leaves. This is the first time that Oliver has seen one growing outside of a pot. Across the street is a church; an illuminated marquee on its lawn bears Asian ideograms. Aside from the cross on the church's steeple, he can't tell anything about it. He stops his bike, looks in all directions, follows passing cars with his eyes. He is the only person on the street not in a car.

Still following the bicycle path, Oliver is back where he started. The men in the field watch him approach. The truck's engine turns over, and the men jump on the flatbed and drive away, all except for the kid and an older man. Oliver raises a hand, holds it there. "Ve'el gabacho," Oliver can hear the man say. He peddles closer.

"Y qué significa eso," Oliver says, dropping his bike, walking over, "gabacho?"

He speaks Spanish, the kid says. Then, I speak English!

What a coincidence, Oliver says, I do, too.

Have one, the kid tells Oliver, handing Oliver a pale green strawberry that fills his entire palm. Oliver bites, and it is tough, like biting into citrus rind, and nearly as sour. He coughs. Yes, the man says, I know, but give it time—. He shrugs, his voice trails off.

"Qué," Oliver asks, but the man just nods, takes the kid by the hand, and leaves.

Back at the rented house, the movers have arrived in two bright yellow trucks with long metal ramps extending to the street. Oliver watches a man in blue coveralls carry his bass drum down the front walk of the house. "Careful with that," Oliver calls, but the man doesn't look. Next to the white stucco walls, the drumhead looks cleaner than it ever has, like an enormous pearl, and Oliver feels as if he is floating above his own head, watching himself straddle his bicycle. He has never felt more alone.

***

Drummer wanted, the ad said. Musical influences: Earth Crisis, Snapcase, Boy Sets Fire, Oingo Boingo, Sense Field. Oliver had never heard of any of them. But, hey, he thinks, he's got some time on his hands, at least until the semester begins. Imagine telling Tim—I joined a band, finally put those drum lessons to work. The annoyed neighbors back in Minersville—he could sell records, put all of them to shame! Then, fear. He drums loud, that's for sure, but finesse—what if those were jazz bands, or fusion, or some cutting-edge genre that he, a kid from Minersville, wasn't even aware of? He is about to dial the listed number, but looks down at his Iron Maiden T-shirt. Dead Eddie smiles from a faded-black background, his claws digging into a station wagon

filled with screaming women. It is, to be honest, dated, and even Oliver knows that. He dials.

Hmm-mm, comes a voice. "You looking for a drummer?" he asks. They are. "Well, I, uh, drum." Well, good. "Can I, you know, for you?" We're auditioning. Oliver gets the address; he'll be there later that day. Hmm-mm, the voice says, then a click.

The address isn't far from his house, an older neighborhood made of single-story bungalows. He finds the house, knocks on the door. A guy his age answers, looks him over. The guy shakes his head. "Too ironic."

"What?" Oliver says.

The guy motions Oliver in. What Oliver sees of the house—the living room, the kitchen, a unfinished bonus room tacked on the back—is empty except for a futon and a pool table. Two other guys sit on the futon. Most of the drywall is heavily-textured and yellowed to the point that it looks painted that way. Bright white squares on the walls bear testament to former decorations. "Hey," they say, nearly in unison.

"Hey," Oliver says.

"Nice shirt," one guy says, makes devil horns with his hands.

"Too ironic."

"Everything's too ironic for you," another says. "What if he likes 'em?"

"Then we don't want him."

"Maybe he'd be good," the devil-horn guy says.

"Then *I* don't want him." Then, silence. "Well," the first guy persists, "which is it?"

"Which is what" Oliver says.

"You actually like those guys?"

Six eyes stare at him. "I don't think I know anymore."

More silence. "Okay," Devil-Horns says, "go ahead and bring in your gear."

Oliver feels his face getting hot. "I didn't know. I don't have a car," he says. "I'm sorry to waste your time—" They don't answer. Oliver turns, takes a step, then stops. He turns around again. "Name a shape."

"Triangle," Devil-Horns says. "Why?"

Oliver begins tracing a triangle in the air with his right hand, the fist bouncing from point to point. "Name another."

The guy who let him in narrows his eyes. "Square," he says, and Oliver draws it with his left, still punching out a triangle with his right. Then Oliver, hands waving, sits down on the floor. "Another," he says.

"A circle?" the third guy says.

"Done," Oliver says. Leaning back, his right foot dances. "One more."

"Another triangle?" Devil-Horns asks.

"I'll do this one upside-down," Oliver says. Four limbs flail, each independent of the other, Oliver emphasizing each vertex with a small pulse, the line segments identical in length. He rocks back and forth slightly on the shag carpeting. "I haven't tried my head in a while," he says. "Wanna give it a shot?"

"Boys," Devil-Horns says, "this could be good."

***

The guy who let Oliver into the house—his name is Garrett, Oliver found out—insisted that Oliver audition with actual drums, so Oliver peddles back to the rented house for his gear and the family van. Much of his drumset is still packed—the cymbals, the throne—so Oliver begins ripping into cardboard boxes, tossing drumsticks around his bedroom, assembling stands. His bass drum stands in the corner, untouched since its arrival.

Oliver finds his tuning key, and he stretches the drum heads. First, the snare drum, tight as his wrist will crank. Then the toms. Finally, he picks up his bass drum, and something rattles inside. Putting it down, he sticks his hand in, wraps his fingers around a short metal tube. He pulls it out—it is Tim's revolver, still dusty. He hadn't seen Tim since that night in the desert; how did he manage? There, in the cylinder—two empty cartridges, two loaded, one vacant chamber. Oliver brings the revolver to his nose, and he wants to believe that he smells sagebrush, but, he thinks, it's probably his imagination. He presses the metal to his cheek, and it is cool.

Of all the things to remember, he thinks. Dropping to his knees, he throws the revolver under his bed. I wish I had never been born, he thinks. Then, no, not *never born*, but born in California. If only he could have just started here to begin with. He looks under the bed, makes sure that light from the window doesn't reflect on the revolver; it is invisible. No, not never born, he thinks, just here, just here, repeating it, still on his knees, the first prayer he has offered in this brown, cactus-filled state.

SHORT-SHORT FICTION

SOMETHING HERE

A graying concrete bunker, the tangible roar of a channeled river. Inside, turbines intersect and roll.

They are here: a teenaged girl and boy, the dam hovering above. I did this, Thomas says, pointing to *Thom* in permanent-marker on the pockmarked wall. Next to his name, a graffiti mushroom cloud in once-bright orange.

Did you do that one, Karen asks, that too?

No, Thomas says, but I wanted to be next to it.

Through bent window bars. Inside, a tunnel of white noise. Thomas' cigarette lighter leads: kicked-in door, wrought-iron catwalk. Their breath blows quick fog. Another splintered door, the plaque still attached: Control Room.

Wanna flood the city, Thomas says.

Don't joke, she says.

It doesn't do, Thomas says, anything. It's old and gutted. Whatever's left just spins.

The lighter barely shows a room with checkerboard flooring. Near them, empty cabinets with electrical cabling crawling out. Karen can't see the other side. There is rot in the air, thick on their tongues. Thomas blows out the lighter, and Karen feels his arms around her shoulders. A whisper in her right ear.

What, she says.

—you down, Thomas says.

Karen doesn't move or speak. One hand leaves her and the lighter clicks on, too close. Karen recoils, swings, connects. A flash of heat on her forearm. She sees Thomas' eyebrows, high, then nothing.

Sorry, she says.

Water churns through unseen arteries, tearing at the walls. Well, Thomas says, let's find it. They drop to their knees. This way, he says. I think.

They feel along the floor, the darkness wet on their cheeks. Karen reaches a wall, follows it to a corner. She feels a long bundle, something soft, covered in a thin blanket. She pokes, and it yields slightly. Something here, she says.

What, Thomas says, finding Karen's feet.

Karen prods again. The smell is unbearable.

Thomas jabs it, too, pulls back the blanket and traces the unseen shape with his fingertips: a smooth forehead; a studded earlobe. Get away, he says. They turn, scurry, panting. Animals get in here, Thomas says. Maybe a snake got him, poor guy.

They wait, backs against the wall. If a bomb hit, Karen says, we'd be safe here. We'd be the only ones.

They'll come, Thomas says. They'll see we're gone and wonder.

Maybe, Karen thinks.

Thomas feels her exhale, hot on his face. Karen, he says. Her breath again, like steam.

Outside the room, there is a loud crack, like the dam splitting in half. Maybe, Karen says, her fingers finding Thomas' neck, closing slightly. We will never be found,

she says, too low for Thomas to hear. Never, she says. Beneath her palms, his blood beats like another strained powerhouse, another cold bursting.

INCONGRUENT POLYHEDRONS

The boy is obsessed with shapes. He draws green-marker triangles on his pale palms, and, two days ago, he took scissors to the wicker-topped barstools in the kitchen, cutting angular patterns in the seats. His parents made him sit in the corner, but then they marveled at the holes, equal on all sides. They watch him spend hours with crayons and any paper he can find, trying to draw a perfect circle. The boy grows frustrated, throws tantrums and crayons.

And the night terrors—the boy awakens, sobbing and writhing, screaming that he sees shapes in the air and they're not the same. Incongruent polyhedrons, Jason thinks, holding the boy through the attacks.

The attacks are frequent, and Jason spends many nights sitting on the living room couch, rocking the boy in the dark.

Tonight, the same. The boy stops crying, sputters into a light sleep and breathes without steady rhythm. By the time Jason rises from the couch, dawn is breaking, and gray light shades the room. Climbing upstairs to the boy's bedroom, Jason steps on a squeaky stair, awakening the boy, but the boy doesn't cry. It's okay, Jason tells him.

I don't want my bed, the boy says, screwing his head into Jason's shoulder.

The sun has climbed higher. I need to get ready, Jason says.

With me, the boy says.

A son shouldn't shower with his father, Jason thinks.

A son shouldn't shower with his father, he tells the boy. He tiptoes with the boy in his arms, past his bed and sleeping wife, into the bathroom, shuts the door. Help Daddy shave, he says, setting the boy on the counter. The boy rubs his pale palms

against Jason's face, and Jason gives him a purring shaver. The boy stabs, stretches Jason's face, runs the shaver nearly into Jason's hair, puts it down. The boy rubs his hands over Jason's face again, first one side, then the other. Not the same, he says, not the same, and for a moment Jason thinks the boy will cry. He hands him the shaver again, urges the boy on with nods and wide eyes. For ten minutes he lets the boy shave, until the rubbing palms on Jason's face say that both sides are equally smooth.

The boy drops the shaver into the dry sink and lunges forward. Again Jason cradles him. In the bathroom mirror, Jason sees the back of the boy's neck, peach like the crayon the boy draws circles with. The shaver still hums. Once more, the boy's hands find Jason's face clear. The boy cries anyway.

COME NOW

A shirtless man in the apartment complex parking lot carrying an empty glass water pitcher. He has paced the length of the parking lot three times and his jeans grow darker as he sweats. It is Biloxi, Mississippi, and it is August. Only a motorcycle in the south corner of the parking lot, a kind of racing bike, and the man, and you wonder where everyone went. He's swinging the pitcher; he's mounting the motorcycle. He's banging on an apartment's door. Now a siren. The man comes back, sits cross-legged on the hot asphalt, the pitcher between his thighs. It is dusk, and the sky is the color of tropical fruits you've seen. Come now, the police say. Watching them, you think of the time you saw a semi-truck swerve to hit a turtle on the interstate. Later, when you bring the pitcher home from where it lay on its side, you marvel that it isn't chipped, it isn't cracked. When your guests drink from it, you tell them where the pitcher came from, and their eyes glaze. It isn't every day, they say, I mean, and their voices fade out. You think you understand. You say yes.

BALBOA, STINGRAY

The painted lines in the beach parking lot glow a wet yellow tonight, the streetlight reaching them weakly. Gloria pulls herself inward, clenches herself against the drizzle. Nearby, stomping oil-rainbowed puddles, is her daughter, aged five quick years, her pink vinyl galoshes like flares against the crumbling asphalt. Now, tracing one painted line. I can balance, the girl says, and it works, you know—you know?

Right, Gloria says, smiles. Behind her, the Balboa Pier yawns into slate-bodied whitecaps. A restaurant on the pier neons *Ruby's* in cherry, but it is closed and abandoned like the rest of the beach—no teenagers with bonfires, no vagrants, not even someone to pay for parking. Her husband fishes off the side of the pier, a slouched shadow against the neon. It is high tide, and the ocean runs at the shore. Gloria watches—it is a film negative, not the water that advances, but the sand that vanishes, develops.

C'mere, her husband says, and Gloria turns, sees his back arched, his neck straining. Something large and triangular dangles from his hook. Her daughter runs past. When Gloria climbs the high, splintered ramp to the pier, she sees it is a stingray, flopping upside-down on the whitewashed boards, its tail flailing like a beheaded snake. Her husband's hook still pierces the stingray's lip. The open mouth is a jagged oval, ringed like the kerfing of a wide sawblade.

The waves have gotten louder, Gloria thinks, and she sees the ray's underbelly: impossibly smooth, gray like a B-movie alien, a drumhead flapping. No, not the waves—the stingray, struggling to breathe. How would I sound, Gloria thinks, trying to breathe water?

Her husband bends over the ray with a pair of needle-nose pliers. It's really in there, he says. Stop moving, he says, and brings his bootheel down on the ray. The body stills, but the tail still sweeps over the deck. He pulls out a pocketknife, cuts the fishing line, and kicks the ray off the pier. Gloria watches the ray grow smaller. It barely even splashes.

Gloria's daughter returns to her puddles, and Gloria stands with her husband. You wanna, he asks, offering Gloria the pole. She says no. When they dated, she would've. When they dated, he wouldn't have dragged her here. It is enough to watch her daughter splash, she tells herself. Or, when it is dry, to see her daughter toss handfuls of sand overhead, then dance under the dim falling clouds.

When I was in high school, she says, I came here for a bonfire with my friends, and they all wanted to jump off the pier.

Stupid, her husband says. Changes depth whenever the tides shift. Break your neck.

I wouldn't do it, Gloria says. I held their clothes for them. One guy, his name was Brian, jumped and swam too close to a fisherman's line. He got snagged. He tried to pull the hook out of his foot but it was really caught and the waves were growing and the fisherman thought he was a fish so he tried to reel him in. I imagine he was screaming, but we couldn't hear him over the waves.

What are you saying, her husband says. Did the kid drown?

What I'm saying, Gloria says, touching her husband's elbow, is I don't know.

You don't know?

I don't know, Gloria says, kicking off her sandals, taking off her damp sweater. I don't know why, she says, whenever we come here, I want to jump. She climbs the railings, one rail, another, tops the third.

Gloria, her husband says.

Gloria looks at him, a dark shape against a white pier against an ocean darker still. What would you think, she says, the ocean heavy on her tongue, if I made all that up? A small splash from her daughter. Beneath her, the waves, like always.

I WILL SING A SONG OF MY BELOVED

1.

I will sing a song of my beloved.

2.

I will harvest the finest corn, he says, here in Moab.

3.

Like the sun, he says, stripping back silk-strung sweet corn husk, the kernels throbbing yellow. Yes, the sun at six in the morning, sparking over poplars, osage orange—Have you seen it, he asks, and I have, though not like him.

4.

And here we are. By day, the tractor gasping and clawing at dirt stolen from crimson sandstone, the skittering iron harrow in tow, the hillside cougars not bothering to hide. By night, we hunker in the frame house, listen to rustling in the carport, a crash from the woodpile, and he fills shotgun shells with rock salt on his reloading press—Good to ward off man or beast, he says.

5.

The former owner is on our front porch in the morning. We needed to sell it to you, he says, we didn't want to. Sure is pretty, he says, what you've done with the place—pretty before, he says, looking at me, prettier now. With me, my beloved says, what I need is what I want. The man nods, stands, and, an hour later, I notice the tractor's tires are all flat.

6.

There were never crows in Moab until the corn. They hover and lilt above the cornfield, black as fleas against a sky washed white with coming rain. When Noah struck dry ground, he let a crow out first, my beloved tells me. We ride the tractor around the field, checking the fence, my tailbone digging into his lap. Around my waist, his arm. Everyone remembers the dove, he says, because the dove returned, even brought an olive branch. Naughty crow, I say. Optimistic, he says. The crow never looked back.

7.

Diesel exhaust from the reaper, buoyant against distant cliffs. Only one crow today, retreating, a shrinking punctuation. Maybe, I think, the city will run a gas line this way soon. Maybe an asphalt road. The exhaust climbs into the sky, mingling, higher still until I cannot tell what rises or sinks, all cloud. A round of thunder, and the reaper stops. Another thunderclap, two. I see no flash. An hour later, the reaper hasn't moved. I run the cornrows, the leaves sharp on my bare arms. The reaper still rumbles, impatient, and he is gone. I squint for footprints—who is to say, the field newly threshed? If I stretch my arm, I feel I can touch the sunburned hills, bring them to me.

8.

Outside the open window, a crow stands above a dead raccoon in the carport, picking with a wet beak. I strike a match for dinner, the hissing gas sweet in my nose. I will sing a song of my beloved, of his arm around me, of his shotgun leaning in the corner. The flame reaches my fingers like a promise.

AFTER: PHOTOBOOTH

The flash draws Gloria's attention to the photobooth, next to the pier, underwater: a spark, a picture taken, a few meters below the slate surface on the ocean's bottom. The floating foam is briefly yellow with light, and she sees a small fish. Joshua—will he show? The photobooth rocks with the current, knocking against a pylon. Another flash. She doesn't remember a photobooth on the pier. Splintered wooden benches; red restaurant neon reflecting on the whitewashed deck. But, no, not a photobooth. One time, she and Joshua came here, and they fished, or he fished, because Gloria watched their young daughter stomp puddles in the parking lot. It rained, that night, like tonight. He won't show, Gloria decides, but she stays on the pier, leaning against the railing. After the funeral, Gloria and her husband separated. Those days, filled with ifs—if Joshua hadn't poached a stingray that night, if Gloria hadn't stood on the pier's railing, shouting, threatening to jump. It wasn't just the stingray. Headlights had illuminated each of her daughter's wiry, wayward hairs—so help me, she thinks, I could see the place I hand-rubbed with spit fifteen minutes prior; it was never about us, although I made it that way. She climbs the railing and spreads her arms. How deep, Gloria thinks. When Joshua arrives, there is no flashing to distract him, no way to see down to the dark shape or the photostrip, dangling from the booth, limp in the tide.

KUNTSLERROMAN

I was seven, and September came too soon. Her name was Ms. Knowles, and she was new to the school; she made the mistake of telling us. Two of my classmates switched names every other day that first week—I'm so sorry, she said whenever they'd announce her mistake. I'm trying, she said, and we laughed. Then she'd apologize again. Her face was pale and her hair was the color of an old penny and her face seemed to grow paler when she apologized.

I was the one to reveal the deceit, secretly, while turning in a worksheet to her desk. She said nothing. The next day, there was a long sheet of butcher paper hanging in front of the classroom, and several pie tins full of tempera paint lay on the floor atop a tarp. Everybody make a handprint on the poster, she said, and we did. These are all our helping hands, she said. We will all help to make this a good year. Later that day, Ms. Knowles found an unlocked drawer of her desk filled with playground sand.

The next day, the handprint poster was gone. In its place was a large mirror. When Ms. Knowles walked in the room, her lips looked more tan than red, and I could barely make out her eyebrows. We've gotten off on the wrong foot, she said. Then she said, louder, You need to take a good, hard look at yourselves. Look, she shouted, look, and pointed to the mirror. Just look. We watched each other's eyes grow wide. Then, quietly, looking down at her desk, she said, please. A girl complained that the mirror reflected sunlight from the window into her face, so Ms. Knowles took the mirror down.

A framed art print greeted us the next day; it consisted of a cheddar-yellow square on top of a rectangle the color of the sky after sunset. An orange border wrapped around

the feathered edges, sometimes barely visible. Ms. Knowles pointed to it with a ruler. This was painted by a man named Mark Rothko, she said. What does it make you think?

I think I could do *that*, a boy said.

Ms. Knowles looked at him for a long time. He was in despair, she said, in New York City. He painted really well but no one liked it until they did. But even when he was making lots of money they still didn't get him.

He made lots of money, another boy asked.

He killed himself, she said. Then Ms. Knowles started to cry, and she sent us out to play.

Days went by. We came to class one morning and found a large piece of plywood screwed to the wall next to the Rothko. It was painted white, and there were red stenciled letters sprayed onto its face reading "Repent or Perish." What does repent mean, I asked Ms. Knowles at recess, or perish? She wouldn't answer.

Going home that afternoon, I realized I'd left my reading-time book in the classroom, and it was due at the library. When my mother took me back to school, I found Ms. Knowles still in the classroom, kneeling in front of the sign, her head bowed. I could hear her breathing from across the room.

In the morning, she was still there, kneeling. When the principal asked her what she was doing, she fell limp to the floor and it took four men to carry her out. The principal taught our class that day, and then we had substitutes for a while. They tried to take the sign off the wall, but, after removing the screws, they found Ms. Knowles had used strong glue as well, so it stayed. It was too big to cover. Eventually, the janitor

painted the sign the same color as the wall, but on sunny days I could still see *Repent* through the paint.

One day, when class was getting out, I waited until all my classmates had left, and I went and kneeled where Ms. Knowles collapsed. I looked up at the sign. Above it, on the ceiling, was a tiny sticker of a baby bird leaving a nest.

What are you doing, my new teacher asked.

I waited before answering. There was a painter named Mark Rothko, I said.

I've never heard of him.

He was nice, I said.

POETRY

AT NIGHT, AFTER REFINISHING TWO BENCHES

Orange County, California

1.
Sun settles in late smog, the sky pulling marine layer
from southern shores and night from Riverside,
and I am here somewhere in the dark
lunging for lightswitches I flicked unthinking
on evenings uncountable, lights now missing.

2.
Three teenage boys, their eyes full and darting,
come over to swim. I look at their car, imagine them
speeding or picking up slender-boned girls.
I want to pull them close and whisper in a hiss,
like a coach or a grandfather: This is not freedom,
because you chase it so hard. Wait.
One night, as you feel for a switch
along a cool wall, freedom will come as dusk,
a forgetting. You will stumble and pitch, there in houses
where you dreamt yourselves older, and then you will hate
the unknown moment you became your own.

3.
Driving to see a friend's latest baby
green fennel dabs and wild mustard stalks
hide cactus on the ridgeline outside.
I inhale, hoping for sage and warm earth
to draw near. They do, weakly.

CHATTER

1.
My birthday deserves celebrating
so you *will* feel well, Dave, you will,
even though your hands still twitch.

2.
Spring has come like autumn,
red leaves on spindle-drawn oaks
and birds flinging south.

A gray squirrel claws at loose ground
under a magnolia, hard enough
to not notice me. So far, an empty hole.

3.
To think a piece of your heart died
on the operating table. Of all places—
calcified kidneys under suction,
your small frame sucking enough anesthesia
to knock out two men, and yet you lived.

Last November you drove a borrowed Coupe de Ville
from grandfather's funeral to cemetery,
caused two fender-benders, all in a four-mile trip.
Blame pills? grief? California?
How many lives left?

4.
Dismay rebuts itself: my squirrel,
hands digging, red dirt spraying,
no acorn to show for it.

For me, this equals wildlife and
so I watch. What do I know?
I stand in the street, waiting.

CHURCH

A television in the next room
sounds like an ocean at high tide
and just to scream over it,
shout to rasp and rend my throat—
azaleas! Listen to bees
in the crape myrtle legging pollen,
a vibrating legion throbbing tree trunks
like augers. And look, there,
longleaf-nailed in stenciled red: *REPENT!*
And I should, of course, even as I stand
in the street watching cardinals, their dart
and verve.

COTILLION

Orange County, California
October 1995

The instructions: *Ask for her gloves*
thank him for taking your gloves
say you're glad to take her gloves
have a cookie sit in the picture window
try small talk. Outside
not on this hill but across Chapman Avenue
the chaparral flames scratch orange
draped and folded. You take her gloves.

THE SHAKES

Sky slinks past, clouds start their heating. Today is the first day of the rest of the first days and eucalyptus bark litters the ground. We tell ourselves to stop and enjoy this fleeting because we read somewhere we ought to and liked it. Sometimes I like you. Sometimes we are just in love. Are you happy, you ask. The day is moving like a bus without brakes, I think, so I say yes. Your head shakes, your glasses fall, then you. I watch you on the grass until your eyes stop rolling and your fingers find each other. Carve our initials on that tree, you order, and the letters will darken to black and stay there, together. We tell ourselves that this makes us stable.

CRAPE MYRTLE:
A VOODOO PRIMER

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

They're like nails, these flowers
their painted-on fuchsias frayed on edge
scratching at a sky unprepared. Fall back.
I pity the bee who chances a hand
pollinating these torches, stamens alight
with goldenrod sneer and sharpened,
filed to scratch anything—like a diamond,
like pavé. They hang from their own weight
the stalks craning like old necks and, man,
when you're too heavy for yourself, then you're *heavy*.

See this bright fusillade, this sear. Once, hurried
I brushed my elbow against its bundle burst—
never mind how quickly, how like floss it first felt—
it burned three days, the flesh charred,
the wound at night glowing pink.

After years of burns and sunspots can I advise:
Don thick gloves. Take cuttings with a silver knife
or the stems won't relent. For enemies
place bunches under their porches
and no friend will cross their threshold
only salesmen and missionaries. For the dead
plant cuttings halfway between coffin and ground:
the skeleton will rise, dance under the next new waxing.
For lovers, keep it far away, because no one
can compete with that heat. It'll run you out of town.
Paradise? Look around. It's vicious out here.

DAILY

calluses on my palms grow
with heavy lifting and
blood beats through them
as they rise and crest.
They mount and anneal,
handle hot banisters
to say nothing of ovenware.
Sometimes I want my poetry
to be like that.

STILL THERE

Randolph, Utah

Yellow sage, the hills, your consent:
Great-Grandfather, Swiss elder bent
into wind always cutting. It blows now,
plows rutted sand below.

Ever the sand. Gone, alpine rush of snow,
slow-spreading valley flush
of white, now only brown, dove gray,
more brown and lichen's red decay.

I bring my wife to see the graves.
Buttoned against sharp spring, we
act respectful parts, trace your children's names
on granite, walk your hills.

The still-iced sky keening, the lake effect—
we elect to leave, shake
off frost, find shelter: a nameplate
of the dead. We kiss, lips raw, wait.

DURING RAIN

I am waiting for it to rain.
I am waiting for wind and lightning
and trees to crack.
Wait with me. See
there are no robins
in the oaks along the path.
The air has a mind of its own.
We could couch-dawdle
continue our television drowse
but this is better because
see—the pinecones are going.

HEAT, TWICE

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Understand already that snow is not
what it seems. Today was ninety-five
or more counting sun and steam
but say it—Utah—and thoughts of snow
follow me hotter. I still see
me chasing wife chasing me
snowball ready, wrapped in bathrobe
and jeans, neighbors watching
my robe thread between pines:
snow fell cold then, not flannelled and spun
as now, a sad batting. I need cool air
these days, recalling buried fields leading to
a brackish lake, not that I can see
for the glare.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR PLANTING

1.
The long-haired Siamese
that I chased away!
What must it have thought
seeing me charging
like so many dogs also outrun—

There were bushes, and
it was gone. If covert safety
were always so easy, *I'd* be gone,
an example to the world:

Here—security and peace
in a shrub! Go AWOL
with this horrified cat!
Put down your guns!

2.
The moon is out. Still can't see the cat.

3.
Somewhere, a man plants azaleas
with the abandon of one
who has better things to do.
Why can't I?

LIKE THIS

For Bryan

Pied Guitarist. I saw your wedding pictures today,
the way you kiss her through your beard
in a Nevada City barn, wildflower boutonniere on shawl-lapel,
narrow-wristed as always. I do not know her.
I wish you well (and her), if only for your sake and because
years ago, with all evidence against me
you thought I could ply my guitar like a bomb
like you did, and so I still make my little echo, even now.

Summer bleaches into fall, static fills the radio.
I am back in your music loft,
upstairs and away from a flirting remainder
of friends spilling on the brick floor below.
We are here because this is your place
or you are this place. It's like this, you say unlooking,
Fender-ready. I glance at the alley outside, the rising heat.
Like this, and again, the room now racketing on itself
as you hack and hammer-on.

MEAN TIME

Time for hands to crack, my palms
mapped in red, a fingered psalm
to falling oak and this sky
broad and chill, dry. Newly calm.

Let's imbosk ourselves in leaves
autumned down, the roof which cleaves
to floor, a grudging assent
and hold, content, thick as thieves.

Rake, then count hours in smoke. Turn
this all to turning, the burn
daubing air and underfoot.
We are put here, close. To yearn.

MEXICO

My brother-in-law and his wife: gone,
off to cruise *Mexico: Siesta*
or Fiesta. I picture the two
white-footed Utahns quick-stepping down
a burning brown beach, silver hawkers
at hand. They have not heard the stories
I have, of endless squatting in jails
for a wrong U-turn, an unpaid bribe.
Yet I am unconcerned. It's a cruise,
after all, staffed with smiling deckhands
so eager to pass out Turkish towels
or spray palms with alcohol. If they
died, my wife thinks aloud, they would not
leave our nieces—the four girls—to us.
Since we don't live in Utah, I say,
and she nods. No family nearby,
not for two thousand miles. And I knew
that my body does not permit us
to have children to raise, our own. But
I did not know that geography
conspired against us at the same time
(not that I ever wish for a death).

ON NOAH'S ARK, RECENTLY REDISCOVERED

I knew by the scent,
not like two of every kind—
hippos, elephants, no.
Others ran to crumbling ropes, smutched beams
someone shouted *A keel! A bone!*
I bent to my clay-crusted boots
and rubbed fingers along the wet welt,
grainy red caking its way under nails.
Bringing hand to face I breathed its must,
shut my eyes remembering El Niño's smell,
how it began as drizzle, so soft
my children danced in it.

RUNNING IN ABSENTIA

Labor Day 2010

There are no pills left, the blue-whites
that rattle a mild sift down my throat.
Yes, withdrawal: legs and arms hiding from my head
as I run the Trace, former railroads
lined in post-oak, yaupon and sweetgum.
Birds climb the longleaf ceiling.
The lights, still orange, help numb feet
slap and twist like supplejack
on asphalt, still day-warm.
Watch these dead toes reach, find ground.
Today I heard a friend's parents had divorced,
the friend who wasn't a good one, who stole
cola from our neighborhood store
then nearly wrecked his gifted car.
Another friend's father has cancer on his groin.
And I would have pills were today not a *holiday*,
the word slipping through my ticking mouth,
a slur of my own doing.

SANTA ANAS BLEW MY FENCE AWAY

Green fennel cloys on hands
after cotton-filled stalks'
quick-cracking. The lichen.
Rattlesnakes dodge nettle
hand in glove with coyotes
that eat my cats. White sage,
prickly pear, beer cans rusting.
The yellow finches, the
sparrows brown as initials
carved in cactus paddles.
My lungs are too clean, living
Southernly where people smoke
instead of the landscape.
Blow, Santa Anas. Blow and burn.

SHOPPING, APRIL

1.
Back on top again, I guess, and this Friday
young squirrels paw the roots of young oaks,
a couch of fallen azalea pinks underfoot and
the idea of wearing corduroy has long since fled.

2.
But you want a downer, right? So
think of autumn in the Rockies.
A whistle of frost flogging aspens,
birches to peeling. Woven clouds
severe as moleskin seal the valley air.

3.
Oh, stop it. Think of suede boat shoes—khaki-paired—
the polished deck of a sloop underneath them.
Smell something nautical and fresh.

4.
Yes, Spring. The animals, the mockingbirds
who don't sound like themselves.
There's a lesson in that.

STILL LIFE WITH FACELIFT

Orange County, California

There is clarity in wildfire. With the cold plastic nozzle
I spatter down each row of cedar-shake roof
and the thought comes: this could wax ekphrastic,
the garden hose climbing the stucco wall
like a wet, broad finger, or the filtered sunlight—
I can stare sunward for the smoke—
or the wind-goaded flames
making cozy with my former school
down the street, at the base of the dry hill.

I could live with the school removed.
But the green fennel-filled wash, the long-needle cactus;
what of my Valencia orange tree?

Now the fireplanes drop powder.
A girl at school takes a flake in the eye.
The cypress coruscated, gardenias blistering,
coyotes and rabbits burst along with the manzanitas,
cholla and yucca mount and translate.

The ridgeline catches, a low glowing scrawl.
Above wild mustard smudge
and chaparral made quick and skipping,
next to neighbor prostrate at his property line,
it swells with blown pine needles.

Tomorrow, when the line reaches Yorba Linda
and there is no roof to hose,
I will drive to The Wedge and dust my hair onto the jetty.
Tomorrow, when nesting finches fly to Arizona for twigs,
red fire retardant will rouge my cheeks in paste,
on my elbows, on my knees. In-between shovelfuls
and sandbags tossed thickly I will steal sighs for my garden,
her facelift winsome, her drab, so comely still.

TE QUIERO

A struck opossum has decomposed on Fourth Street
three weeks, dried to an arch inches from passing traffic.
It is nothing but sparse hide, wispy claw and wound tail
all brown as untanned tendon. Rain has glued it to pavement,
brought pebble and skin to union.
I hesitate to call it *it*. Who knows what hordes of young
she pouched along branches
or the feral cats he fought away?
Who knows what eager diggers finding my grave
many rotten years hence will say about *its* ring,
its belt buckle, *its* teeth. Somewhere, maybe
atop the fresh pile of dirt, I will shake my transparent face
as if to say, *You fools, look inside its ring*.
See what Melanie had engraved while she made me wait
outside the shop, my back turned.

THE STOP-SIGN

Later that night, investigators found the stop sign that controlled the traffic at that intersection lying on the ground near the site of the accident.

Thomas Miller v. State of Florida
February 28, 2001

February 6, 1996

Admit it: you need a liberator, friend.
The truest measure of a victim
is that they don't know they are one.
So hang on. Trust me.

Call it something other than theft—
you paid for me, after all. Stake your claim
and find a target. Heavy traffic, light:
there's no difference.
We'll all fall in the end.

Do you have a half-inch socket wrench?
Every crank makes hair rise
on the back of your arms.
Enjoy it. When was the last time
the small of your back was
this taut, armchair person?

Just think: soon there will be nothing
between young lovers and salvation,
speeding home late from happy doorsteps.
Remember those tiptoed arrivals
and say: no more.

One day, it will be thus countrywide,
no stops, no seizures, no license plates
or tickets or summons except that
of your conscience blown wide.
We'll speed from sea to shining sea
on a concourse of glistening tarmac.
Be there. Do your duty. Everyone.

THEN

Are you asleep I ask her, as I should be.
I imagine myself in Costa Rica
the missionary clutching an umbrella.
The time I was nearly stabbed—
I swing on a vine at Los Chorros.
The volcano fills with water
and elephant-ear leaves.

She is with me. Tall as now,
she laughs when people
think her Tica. Her skin,
olive in the sun, her paled hair.
Hands are all I can touch, and briefly.

Still she sleeps in a room
cooled and carpeted, unlike the cement sótanos
where I lie scratching bitten ankles
wondering when clouds
will crest the green hills.

A PINECONE AND A RUNNER SOUND THE SAME, SOMETIMES

Running an abandoned train track in the dark
one blank foot falling in front of the other,
you see the sky, bright enough, and think
from the other side of the world
the moon holds a phaeton, not a face.

Time is like this, a run, lately in the dark,
ever faster with lungs and heels until
it seems no pavement moves underfoot,
the midnight trees still just an idea.
Still nothing really changes—
the apartment, the job, the whatevers, all.

Keep running, and look up. See the trees bristle and
redivide the moon, then try this: you are a longleaf pine
tall and slender. You sway gracefully
when wind comes your pinecones never hurt anything
as they fall. You're beautiful because
you have to be. Go on. One foot, the other.

CASTRATING SHEEP WITH HER TEETH

For and After Kimberly Johnson

Pecans blow yellow across the lot,
the sky pales with late heat.
I think of your incisors
cocked against the bellies of tottering lambs,
hornless rams barely old enough to bleat
into your hair as you pinch thin legs together
and pull flesh to face, eyes closed.
It's cleaner, you maintain, quicker-healing,
the meat fattens well after teeth sink
and bulge falls, spat, to ground.
You say your shepherd kin named it *marking*
for the scar rams bear, serrated
like the range they graze.
Yet who says the marking stops with the lambs,
after you corral with heavy boot-toe
and return to pasture, jaw muscles sore,
tongue still retreating, kicking dirt on the warm heap—
do your hands still shake? Did they ever?

DELICATE ARCH

Arches National Park, Utah

1.
I love how you nearly aren't:
strong, secure, a monument to the ages.

2.
Maybe *I'll* try vacancy for a while,
decorate with blacklight paint, till the garden
and leave it bare. I will write poems so transparent
no one will know they're reading
until their eyes water and they crave chocolate.

3.
Somewhere in the desert
an old arch, now dust,
blows through someone's hair.

EARLY SUMMER, HATTIESBURG

After Lance Larson

1.
You wrote *sometimes it's loss I want*,
and I know, living with rows of glossy-hung magnolias,
their burst-blossoms exhaling and blue skies
that carry on like stale chat.
It's a lot, you know, too much.

2.
Oh, for a dose of—what?
This time last year was sparrow-brown Wasatch winter
was a rusting Ford, was weeks of antibiotics
and their science-fiction names: Augmentin, Biaxin, Ketek.

My martyr-front came easily, walking home each night
dressed in spent wool coats and road salt.
With pity's confidence I could call for my wife,
her warmth, on the sofa, in bed, arcing,
beside me like marañón seed and pod.

3.
I can't complain. Really, I can't, though
sometimes I want to.

4.
Last Monday, a tornado, furrowing Forrest County,
the woods all hard-spun ruts, and as we all clustered
like smoked bees in the lobby of our building,
watching ruin on a phone held aloft, I heard,
"It's heading to Petal, Laurel."

"Where my wife works," I said, loud enough so others would hear,
dialing her number with a finger like a firing-pin.
I thought of the children at her daycare huddled in a corner—
their toy-strewn room—my wife above them
broad-spread arms like Moses, a shepherd.

But it faded. Then I imagined myself, the intrepid, the rescuer,
charging storm-bound like McQueen or Eastwood, the crowd's cheers

dying as the tornado picks me up, the rain flogging my face to welt,
my soaked shirt grasping at feebling muscle—finger still dialing—
the look on a dozen hundred pallid widemouthed faces
below as I go up, higher, higher still, laughing
like the man who pretends to get a joke, but doesn't know it's on him—

5.
An hour later, the tornado past, no trees split, no deaths,
not a home upended, it was still with me—
not the reedy wind or the red radar-amoeba on the phone,
but my cry: "My wife."
And I sat down with myself, waxing Socratic:

Q: Why did you yell that?
A. There was a tornado.

Q: Why did you yell that?
A: There was a tornado, a large one,
heading for my wife's daycare, ready to suck up babies,
rip the diapers right off them, their bodies,
their (likely soiled) diapers fluttering
like ticker-tape in the wind.

Q: Why did you yell that?
A: I was too far from the daycare to help, to do anything.
I couldn't just stand there, even if all I could do was shout.

Q: Why did you yell that?
A: Fine—I'm a show-off; I'm dramatic. At the moment
when my attention should've been on my wife,
I was thinking about myself, how
I'd seem like a caring husband.

Q: Why did you yell that?
A: Because I seemed like a caring husband, and
that made me happy.

Q: Why did you yell that?
A: Because happiness is a never-ending quest
against serotonin and parking tickets and, yes,
even tornados and because I was taught
I'd regret undone errata the most.

Q: Why did you yell that?
A: I don't know. Blame the wind.

GUSTAV

Hattiesburg, Mississippi
September 2008

Our hurricane is dapper in approach,
a cummerbunding stretch of white-on-black
in ribboned windage raking east, then back
along a westward highway. Our reproach
appears in billboards slashed: a gap-faced coach,
a redivided lawyer. The cars, packed
to bursting on their contraflowing track.
When we are fled and gone, a ruling roach
will take these plastered walls and decorate
in hues of pinestraw, Mississippi vine,
the mildewed carpet rotting quick to brown.
I dispossess myself; I contemplate
the evenings blown in placid, blind recline.
Who really owns this place? Look up. Look down.

MAGNOLIAS

August 2008, Interstate 55

It's a long way down, this falling.
First from Memphis, then south:
a rain-blurred bridge, a lone tree
in an Arkansas field, a wash.
Four hours, five. Drive on.

Today should have been my birthday,
I say, so buy me lunch. Today
is the end of the world, I say,
so what's your number?

Drive on. By now you know the joke,
too: I have no idea where we're going, but
we're making great time. I'd laugh
if I didn't know where we will sleep tonight.
No magnolias, at least not yet.
See the optimism? The interstate bounces.
Count it: Six hours, eight.

It's like that song—what is love? Try New
Orleans, Vieux Carré, flooded. Try Jackson—
Chimneyville—or Biloxi, the billboards
slashed before Hurricane Gustav. It's a long way
down. Try smiling.

MIDSUMMER: RUNNING

For M.M.P.T.

Day One

It's late morning, and the highway lights are on,
their triad starings still bright. Their halogen—
I'm not paying for it.

Day Two

I've killed more fruit flies in the past two days.
Have you landed yet?
The sprung walls are pockmarked now,
pox-marred, shingled.
I didn't know they bled like that.

Day Three

And that slash of tree bark
lying in phone booth shadow, how
it looked like a dead seagull.
Now is where I confess: *we always lie and*
we always enjoy always the sheer lying,
we, like chameleons, or salamanders,
in the light or dark, it doesn't matter.

Day Four

This new South, where leaves become frogs
on the Longleaf Trace, cardinals bloom
four-directioned flame spun red.
My Northern eyes still work,
mostly. I'm lying again.

Day Five

Have you landed yet, dearest cliffhanger?
Remember the time we borrowed that car
and drove to a place south of South?
Here we are, I guess,

except you're not.

Day Six

The windshield speckles.
The trees, black on black.
On my right, the blur of neon, a bar.
On my left, three cars enjambed
slick. Sixty miles, night
and my happy motored nearing. Be there.

POTSHERD, SCRAPING

"I will lay mine hand upon my mouth."
Job 40:4

1.
How high I am.
Let me be brought down, then,
to see how long I can hold my breath.

Let me thrash about and cry
how favor rises and settles upon me
in names I seldom know. Let me delight—
the escape of bad colds! Deliverance
in an angry nerve ending!

There are madrigals in a list of medications.
When scalpel cuts septum
and suction sings a cleaning path,
it is my descant.

2.
I will gird, I will bind,
I am chipped and dehorned.
My fleshy table awaits stylus
applied or driven, if I deserve it.

And though skin worms
drop my serotonin, wreck my car,
surround me with horribly beautiful women
and make me squint a little more
each year and never say why,

I will scratch a proverb across my face
and with swollen glands shape my mouth
into psalterings wet, my sorry sodden tongue
grasping at *thank you*.

RUBBING WISTERIA ON MY FOREHEAD

After Kimberly Johnson

I run among spring-loaded wisteria
and think *bamboo is a pox*,
the way it hides a blue jay
and never stops growing.
Really: what always grows?

On second thought: what doesn't?
See that tree branch, now a woven ghost of web
pocketing flies. See also: appetite,
or the wisteria, verbing perpetual.

Even my soles, wasting with every stride
still make this road.
Give or take one hundred years
I and red Yazoo clay could line the Trace
to Natchez, to the river.

SUBURBAN LANDSCAPE WITH ROBINS

It was that time again. The sandpipers blew and wheezed.
Somebody flushed the block's fire hydrants,
still the creek ran brack and the tapwater was a kind of buff.
Squint: you could catch the sun between bare pecan limbs.

But those robins, gorging in the rain-saturated field!
You thought them parrots, their breasts
rose-gold in the dimming sun
and so you observed them, dozens, eating,
then alighting in a teenage oak.

Eventually they flew. In hindsight, it wasn't anything.

It was one thousand copper proof-sets
raining above my balcony, coins that would make Grandfather,
the obsessed collector, rise from his clay grave.

You say the robins covered branches and the tree seemed leafy.

You felt eddies left by legion wings—
they could have been bats, you say,
but thank goodness they weren't
because it's not as easy to tell your wife
Honey, let's stroll among the bats.

Beneath the tree, you stood with your wife
by the small stone wall there were birds and the sun.

THEY WERE CHERRIES

"...maybe I'll water the tea roses; maybe
I'll weed something."
Jay Hopler, "Gardening"

Let's weed something
tender fingered soft city transients not knowing
longleaf from pinestraw. Here's hoping
for the hopeless: is that pale azalea or
climbing cherry, its heavy white tossing skyward—
Keep the rake cocked like this and
I'll do the dragging. How these pinecones fall in
unannounced like missionaries. Call some robins and
tell them their red hour has come.
Apologies to the neuter plum, but
the cycad palm won't wait
nor the saw. We score the earth and still
it springs. More raking, thank goodness.
Never too late for rain, or a young harvest.

TROPICAL STORM FRANK

Because I drove to the beach during Frank,
ignored the shredded red flag and nailed myself
into a wave, the plumb and drag of current in my nose,

the horizon gone, an ash-blotted sky against slate breakers,
against my flailing arms held high. The brine in my
vein-mapped eyes, or the foam: an awe—

because the 405 Freeway still winds like a noose
through former fields: strawberry, orange, gourd, and
more hangs with each return; because,

at eight, my sister's friend fell in the backyard.
I pulled our fleabag dog off her, and ten years later
she drove off an overpass, but it was an open-casket funeral
anyway. What was the question?

But, still, the storm: because, when the waves plied the sand
and body surfers crashed right and left,
all I saw was spray—I called it many things, none ugly.

UNTIL CATALINA

Stop. There is no reason to associate
your students' inability to do their homework
with your grandfather, who died yesterday.

Nor should you associate either
with Hurricane Ida, the latecomer,
growing in the Gulf like mold on a wall.

You're okay, really. You'll even go sailing
in Newport Bay after the funeral.

All of you will. You'll cram a rented shallop,
follow sea-mark seaward to brack,
let red tide hush your eulogies with bore.
You'll shoot the guzzle between jetties,
dodge wrack-line jetsam
until Catalina looms before you like a parent.

If the funeral is at noon,
you can make open sea by four,
can drop chain and line by five.

Somewhere around Mobile,
a roof will be tearing from a house
but you won't hear it.

OFFSHORE

"One must imagine [...]"
Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus

"This is the lower sling swivel."
Henry Reed, "Naming of Parts"

We are swimming, not sunk. We will not be.
We have run to the pier and back
without pausing for loose sand. The hole,
hid in the jetty, fills with water and crabs
and shells we could give as gifts
but we do not, for there is swimming
around the rotting pylons, held by barnacles
against high tide, and we labor against a sideways rip.
Soon, we will crash against the reef's reach.
Surfers will tell us to raise our knees
but it will not help, nor do we care.
There are the waves, bleaching driftwood
floats past, and we swim. You could say
we are happy.